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Negotiating cinematic complexities and Gender identity in war Film *Meherjaan*

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Abstract: - Cinema is one important source for comprehending and enhancing archive history, as well as bringing a fresh perspective to the table in terms of understanding diverse historical occurrences. In spite of the fact that it is an excellent medium for amusement, the cinema is also an excellent medium for obtaining knowledge, gaining education, and gaining an awareness of a situation in our contemporary and technical world. Cinema has power to represent or (mis)represent the events. One of the most horrific occurrences to take place on the Indian subcontinent was the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. The anguish that was inflicted by this conflict was shown in a number of films, which does a far better job of explaining the horrors that it produced than statistical data can. The hostility and violence, the anguish of being homeless, the sense of loss, large-scale human massacres, forced migrations, economic misery, issues of dislocation and displacement as refugees, and questions of sexuality and gender relations have all been well projected in a variety of Bengali and Hindi films, as well as in theatre and literary writings. This paper will critically investigate The Bangladeshi movie *Meherjaan*. This movie develops a diversity of ideological and generic viewpoints and articulates many shades of conflict, and serves as the primary topic of this paper

Key words: Cinema, Bangladesh, Films, liberation war, violence

Meherjaan, Rubaiyat Hossain's first directorial feature film, is described by the director as "women's 'femi-nine' re-visiting of the Bangladesh national liberation," as well as a "narrative of loving the 'Other' that proposes an artistic alternative to violence." (Meherjaan Press). *Meherjaan* is a narrative of Meher, a young Bengali lady, in love with a Pakistani soldier amid the Pakistan-Bangladesh conflict of 1971. The Pakistani soldier ultimately betrays his unit in order to be with Meher. The fate of the young Meher is written by the conspiracies of those times, and the young lovers have little control over their ability to stay together. She is a broken woman who has been ravaged by war. Her life has been turned upside down after being raped by Pakistani soldiers; she is now tainted, a Birangona (Bengali word for war heroine, a title given to raped women during war). In an interview with *The Daily Star* Rubaiyat Hussain remarks that she had a strong conviction that the movie ought to conclude on a more upbeat tone, despite the fact that she wanted to draw attention to the Birangonas, the brutality of rape, and the disregard towards the lives of women during wartime. Her goal was for the film to help heal the wounds that 1971 caused. Even though the town is home to their relatives, numerous freedom fighters also find

sanctuary in the rural areas. As a result, the peace and quiet of the area is disrupted by the separatist ideas that they uphold. Meher befriends two peace-loving sadhus who advocate nonviolence and a love for environment and who also provide a safe haven for a Pakistani soldier who has escaped from his post. The film is a compelling account of a family torn apart by its members' conflicting ideals of love and peace and the fierce nationalism of the Bengali independence struggle. As the story opens, a young lady called Sarah has moved back to her home country of Bangladesh. Sarah is Neela's daughter; she was a war baby who was given for adoption to a foreign couple. With the help of elder Meher, who likewise shows no emotion, Sarah is able to put together her history. Meher's recollections of 1971 provide a uniquely female take on that year's events. Her story is told from the perspective of a young woman whose first and foremost emotion throughout the fight was love, rather than the rage that fueled the situation.. Her Pakistani soldier gives her the endearing nickname "Meher-Jaan," which is an expression of affection that is personal and has no limits.

This hard reality is shown in the 2011 film *Meherjaan* in a manner that is both moving and instructive, providing a glimpse into the delicate geography and beautiful aesthetic of the country we know as Bangladesh. A more moderate side of the Bengali people is shown via the film's photography, conversation, and character development. The story of two lovers, one of whom is Pakistani and the other of whom is Bengali, is told through the lens of the proverb "love thy enemy." The basis of the film is philosophical, drawing inspiration from both Gandhi and the Bible; after all, "to befriend an adversary is the quintessence of real faith," as the filmmaker puts it. But during the awful brother-on-brother violence that erupted in 1971, religion took a backseat as racial prejudice raised its ugly head and became the primary focus of attention. Rubaiyat Hossain, justified her choice of method by highlighting the fact that the movie presents the viewpoint of a "counter-narrative" of the conflict through the eyes of a female character (Mohaiemen 2011). Some members of the audience, however, did not accept the 'counter-narrative' of history that was given in *Meherjaan* since it did not align with the socio-political goal, national interest, or popular memory of the conflict. Regarding this movie, Ferdousy Priyabhashini a Birangana woman who was regularly sexually assaulted by Pakistani Forces in war, and that the movie has minimised the pain of rape victims like her. Her opinion on the film *Meherjaan* is quoted by Etherajan "I am a rape victim and I have gone through lots of humiliation and suffering. My objection to the film is that they have shown a soft corner for the Pakistanis," she says. "There is a silent message in the movie that we can forget about it. This historical sentiment cannot be erased." (Qtd by Ethranjan) Nayamika Mookherjee however remarks that:

"The response to *Meherjaan* was a reaction to the demasculinisation that might be felt by some and is an insight into the psyche of Bangladeshi masculinity which is uncomfortable with individual expressions of female sexuality."

Meherjaan functions to destabilise established concepts of "truth" regarding the conflict and to face the deepest concerns of colonialism, notably internalised cruelty among postcolonial subjects. This is accomplished via the use of a number of different methods. Along the same lines as some of these other works, the movie attempts to reimage the self while simultaneously humanising the 'other'.

This movie takes some bold and new steps in depicting the feministic realities of war torn Bangladesh. Neela, the rape victim protagonist of *Meherjaan*, does not hide her wants, particularly those of a sexual nature, from the audience, despite the fact that doing so would be contrary to the prevailing

societal norm in modern Bangladesh about the treatment of rape victims. She also says that before the conflict, a Bangladeshi student ally raped her viciously. This was in addition to the rapes she suffered at the hands of Pakistani forces. By having a male character from Bangladesh play the part of a rapist doing an act comparable to those performed by the Pakistani army or enemy, the film questions the widespread belief that the Pakistani military is unequivocally savage. The movie put a question mark on widely agreed notion of resistance forces being good in every aspect. It was something not acceptable for nationalists and they saw it as a distortion of history.

One of the appealing factors of *Meherjaan* was its multinational cast which included artists from Indian, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Renowned artists from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan formed its lead cast, but it nonetheless received harsh comments from many parties, especially those who have a say in how the Liberation War is remembered and recorded. *Meherjaan* was feared by cultural elites because of his ability to filter and add complexity to the recollection of 1971. (Ethirajan 2011). People in Bangladesh were particularly worried that it may have an impact on the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) that was established in 2009. The purpose of this domestic tribunal was to look into allegations of war crimes perpetrated by locals in collusion with the Pakistani military. Additionally, Pakistan has never publicly apologised or claimed responsibility for the genocide it perpetrated during the war with Bangladesh, in which an estimated three million people were killed and two to three hundred thousand women were raped.

The film's director, Rubaiyat Hossain, justified her choice of method, saying that the female viewpoint shown in *Meherjaan* provides a "counter-narrative" to the conflict (Mohaiemen 2011). The 'counter-narrative' of history portrayed in *Meherjaan* was rejected by several members of the audience because it did not align with the socio-political agenda, national interest, or popular memory of the conflict. Over the four decades since Bangladesh's independence, media images and other cultural transmission venues have shaped and affected public recollections of the conflict. The public memory mechanism kept its selective process going, according to the will of institutions and groups via a system of exclusion and inclusion. Thus, the public's recollections of the Liberation War might be seen as a product of "chosen to be remembered" (Neiger 2011: 4). Many political and cultural discussions in Bangladesh have circled back to the conflict. Since the Liberation War has been repeatedly established and reaffirmed as the originary, foundational site of the nation, it follows that those in a position to mediate what the Liberation War signified (or, to make the Liberation War signify) have a significant say in what it means to be Bangladeshi. Therefore, *Meherjaan's* cancellation is more evidence that women's perspectives are still not acceptable in the larger debate of modern Bangladeshi nationhood and national identity. This is especially true given the way in which the Liberation War is memorialised in popular culture and film. In her paper "*War, Healing, and Trauma: Reading the Feminine Aesthetics and Politics in Rubaiyat Hossain's Meherjaan*" Elora Chowdhury contends that "Meherjaan's undoing was the result of its emphasis on shared vulnerabilities and humanity across entrenched positions of victim and perpetrator." In the same paper however Elora Chaudhury while commenting on the various aspects of this movie, she quotes zaffar sobhan and writes that a romance tale involving a Bengali lady and a Pakistani Army man, intended to convey a female perspective of conflict, "ultimately does a disservice to the very female narrative that the director professes it is her goal to give voice to,". Although *Meherjaan* tries to turn away from the "grand narrative" and drives love as the vehicle to do so. She adds that

Sobhan and others who have criticised the film have said they believe it 'distracts' from more 'pressing combat tales'.

Both the victorious and defeated sides will tell their own version of the war's events, but there will always be male protagonists and villains. In popular culture, female protagonists often play the role of the selfless martyr. Females are routinely objectified, mistreated, and raped since they are considered inconsequential to the quiet environment. In an interview with *The Daily star*, director Rubaiyat Hossain said that one of the goals of *Meherjaan* was to "break away of the usual male narrative and initiate a dialogue to examine various viewpoints on the Liberation War." A real decolonization also necessitates the decolonization of subjectivity and personal identity, which *Meherjaan's* gendered recounting of 1971 strives to restore (Saikia 2011, 9)

Specifically, throughout the last four decades, since the independence of Bangladesh, images in the media and other places of cultural transmission have impacted and shaped public recollections of the conflict. This has been the case in Bangladesh as well. The mechanism of the public memory maintained a selective process in which it satisfied the wishes of the institutional and group actors via a process of exclusion and inclusion of certain elements. As a consequence, the collective recollections of the Liberation War are something that is "chosen to be remembered" (Neiger 2011: 4). The conflict has been a recurring issue in political debate as well as cultural discourse in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The horrific aspect of the Liberation struggle that took place in 1971 was shown extremely well in a few films. During this battle, many people were displaced, their homes were burned down, their crops were ruined, an uncountable number of people were killed, a number of women were kidnapped and an even bigger number were raped, and the ground in Bangladesh was used as a site to cremate bodies. It would seem that the film *Meherjaan* is making an effort to give love and peace a chance. In the midst of violence and bigotry, it makes an effort to preserve humanity. This movie isn't like a lot of the other ones that are about liberation war that. It does not claim that it is a documentary, nor does it assert that it is a portrayal of the Liberation War. Both of these assertions are false. Since this film is an entirely fictional work that only makes passing mentions to real-life occurrences, any accusations that it is an attempt to rewrite history are completely without merit.

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