Introduction

National Cinema and Its Absences

Whereas the prologue mapped my historical and methodological—feminist, human rights, cinematic—approaches to Muktijuddho cinema’s investment in identity, gender justice, and healing, this introductory chapter offers an engagement with the Bangladesh postindependent film industry, and its evolving preoccupation with and (de)centering of nationalism, women, and war. Bangladeshi films about the Muktijuddho quite unequivocally form the genre known as “national cinema.” These films that depict the defining event for the nation’s self-determination have often represented the struggle for independence through a gendered and sexualized lens of male valor and female shame—the heroism of freedom fighters and the sacrifices of women. The Muktijuddho has not been adequately recognized, nor has its impact been assessed globally, or even regionally, for its genocidal violence. Despite some guilty verdicts from the Bangladesh war crimes tribunals in 2011 and onward, state-level negotiations involving India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have failed to bring about a resolution for the crimes against humanity; instead, political parties in Bangladesh have instrumentalized _shadhinotar chetona_ (the spirit of 1971) to advance their varied agendas. In this context, film and literature have been critical mediums through which a collective memory and national solidarity have been shaped.

The films I focus on in this book represent a shift away from the binary of oppression/resistance and victimhood/agency, especially with regard to the depiction of women’s experiences. By no means comprehensive of the Muktijuddho genre, the films I chose to examine are mostly by and centrally
about women. Further, the attempt to memorialize the varied experiences of women in the Liberation War is a way to write their complex and agential roles into the national history as well as advocate for recognition, responsibility, and justice. Notably, instead of primarily focusing on state-level negotiations or masculine combat, each film equally highlights the intimate, domestic, or “feminine” sphere as the site of struggle and meaning. By a feminine sphere, I mean those spaces that are relegated to the feminized in dominant patriarchal ideology; however, they can also be read as the source and portrayal of nonconformity, mutuality, and solidarity. By allowing the viewer to remember, imagine, and work through traumatic events such as war and conflict through a feminine aesthetic, cinema can help us appreciate the moral choices and interpretive acts of women, consigned to the feminine sphere and cast as passive victims or witnesses. Women in these films, as we see later in this chapter and in the subsequent chapters, make unexpected and sometimes jarring choices: nursing a wounded soldier from the enemy side, seeking the assistance of a sympathetic Pakistani soldier after having been raped by others like him, and embracing a child of rape even when the nation rejects them. The recognition of these moral choices is a legacy of the war that viewers learn to appreciate through the medium of cinema as an
archive where diverse women’s stories are memorialized, just as the state erects memorials and museums to commemorate martyrs.

In this chapter, I investigate the role of national cinema in documenting and engendering a conversation about nation, history, identity, healing, and reconciliation. The Introduction has two sections: The first provides a historical context for Muktijuddho films as the genre emerged within the film industry, and the second analyzes war themes among three recent and divergent films that expose the elisions around national identity, gender, and healing. The three films—Munsur Ali’s *Shongram 71* (*The Struggle for Love and Survival*, 2014), Shameem Akhtar’s *Itihaash Konna* (*Daughters of History*, 2000), and Rubaiyat Hossain’s *Meherjaan* (2011)—grapple with contested and difficult questions that push the contours of historical memory. These films engage critically with the multifaceted narratives of the birth of a nation, the foundational struggle over identity, the intimate relations between gender, nation, and sexuality, the legacy of war, and the ethical reckoning with trauma. All three films narrate these themes through the lens of human suffering and the intimate, affective, and interpersonal relationships involving women. Finally, I offer comments about national cinema as an advocacy tool—to generate conversations about history and memory, social as well as political recognition of justice, and human rights—within an increasingly transnational space.

The History of Muktijuddho Cinema

Muktijuddho cinema emerged as a tool, the camera as a weapon, the filmmakers as witness, to narrate the suffering and sacrifice of the Bengali nation and its violent birth. It has evolved out of the experience of a war that is frequently cast as an “Indo-Pak” war, where the role of Indian intervention is seen as both decisive and heroic. In the subcontinent, the Muktijuddho is either erased as a shameful past, as is the case in Pakistan, or is subsumed under the better-known “Indo-Pak” war, in which India plays the hero in bringing liberation to Bengalis, as is the case in India. Other accounts cast it as a “secession” and a betrayal by East Pakistan of West Pakistan. In these views, East Pakistan divested from an Islamic identity to embrace its more Hinduized culture. A racially tinted discourse, ethnic Bengalis—a darker and smaller people—were seen as inferior to the Punjabis of the west. This divestment is traced back to the cruel politics of dividing Bengal, most emphatically in 1947, when an arbitrary line was carved through the region separating the Muslim majority east from the Hindu majority west despite shared culture, language, and history. Internally, the struggle is remembered as a glorious one that brought freedom to its oppressed peoples through rev-
olution. Official figures suggest staggering loss and sacrifice: up to three million died, and sexual violence against women was an organized tool to subdue the Bengali population. This history has figured prominently in films produced both in and out of the commercial film industry in Bangladesh. Although these films vary widely in terms of originality and quality, the liberatory inspiration of 1971 is the main identifiable characteristic that sets this cinema apart as a national phenomenon.

The Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan) Film Development Corporation (FDC) was established in 1957. Tanvir Mokammel, a leading filmmaker in Bangladesh, reflects that in newly created Pakistan, most of the country’s resources were channeled into the economic and social development of its Western Wing, where the general sentiment was that the humid, swampy lowlands of the East were not conducive for celluloid. Lahore and Karachi were the main sites for cultural development despite the fact that West Bengal—with geographic temperament similar to those cities—had its own thriving film scene that included the likes of renowned Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray. After the Bengali leaders Hoque, Bhashani, and Sorwardy formed the United Front political coalition in 1967, cultural development of East Pakistan gained some momentum. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who would later become Bangladesh’s first president, was then the minister of industries and commerce under the United Front, and he took the initiative to establish the Eastern Wing of the FDC. Although the first full-length East Pakistani Bengali language film—Abdul Jabbar Khan’s Mukh-O-Mukhosh (The Face and the Mask)—was released in 1956, prior to the establishment of the FDC, it was only after the corporation’s establishment that full-length cinema production in East Pakistan started in earnest. From 1956 to 2016 at least 3,300 full-length films were made in East Pakistan/Bangladesh, 3,000 of which were made between 1972 and 2016. Apon Chowdhury (2017) estimates that at least 50 of these are about the Liberation War. Additionally, 140-plus short films and documentaries about the war have been produced.

Chowdhury categorizes war cinema—both feature and documentary—into three groups: those films based directly on the experience of 1971, those that focused on postindependence, and those that integrated the war into the story line through flashbacks, fragments, or as side plot or backdrop. The first category comprises films that were actually made during the war, including the acclaimed documentaries Liberation Fighters (1971) and Stop Genocide (1971), as well as Chashi Nazrul Islam’s Ora Egaro Jon (Eleven Freedom Fighters, 1972), the first feature film to be released in independent Bangladesh. Interestingly, while many countries with more specialized film industries have taken decades to make films about their own civil wars, four major feature films were released within months of the war’s end in Bangladesh—a country whose film history is frequently referred to as “young.” This
point is important because, as Chowdhury says, after the war many freedom fighters put down their firearms and picked up their cameras for the ongoing battle over nation building. Since early years, Muktijuddho cinema undertook the work of the “archeological method” of intervention (Stillman 2007) claiming and reclaiming a traumatic history frequently through the inclusion of historical footage as well as portraying the lush and fertile landscape of rural Bangladesh—alluding to the sacrifice to emancipate the golden motherland (shonar Bangla²). In 1972, four full-length features based on the Liberation War were released: In addition to Ora Egaro Jon, these include Orunodoyer Ognishakkhi (Witness to the Rising Sun), by Shubhash Dotto; Bagha Bangali (The Fierce Bengali), by Anondo; and Roktakto Bangla (Blood-Stained Bengal), by Momtaz Ali.

Zahir Raihan, leftist revolutionary writer, thinker, and activist, was already an acclaimed filmmaker in his own right in preindependence Bangladesh, having made the classic nationalist satire Jibon Theke Neya (A Glimpse of Life), in 1970, and Behula, in 1966. In June 1971, as the war raged, the provisional government invited Raihan to make a series of documentaries about the bloody struggle that was erupting in South Asia, about which the global community knew little. The main purpose of the documentaries would be to raise consciousness and spur international intervention. Raihan was already at work on Stop Genocide, which documented the terrible violence of the war as it was unfolding and that too with sparse technical and financial resources. Importantly, this film put the Bengali struggle for self-determination within a global context of anticolonial and anti-imperial struggles including critiques of the United States in aiding West Pakistan, and the United Nations for its failure to protect human rights. Archiving the traumatic history meant bringing to light the little known, disappeared stories and thereby reclaiming a particular memory from the vantage point of the marginalized, the invisibilized (Stillman 2007, 498). Charged with this monumental task, Raihan created an advisory board composed of prominent intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers, including Syed Hasan Imam, Alamgir Kabir, and Babul Chowdhury. The result was four critical documentaries: Stop Genocide and Liberation Fighters, mentioned above, and A State Is Born and Innocent Millions, all with English subtitles. Together these films aspired to educate the world about the inspiration for and the horrors of 1971. To do so, they employed genocide, destruction, rape, looting, and guerilla warfare as the primary plot points. These films had the effect of canonizing 1971 as an event encapsulated by key motifs—mass murder, rape, arson, and the righteous guerilla insurgence—that over time concretized as tropes. Most important, these films strived to capture the war as it was experienced by the “people of Bangladesh,” and the authenticity was rubber-stamped by filmmakers who were also freedom fighters
themselves (Hayat 2011). In turn, these documentaries set the context and the ideal for a Muktijuddho ideology for subsequent films.

At the very outset, the creation of FDC in the Eastern Wing of Pakistan was motivated by the desire for self-representation in the face of grave social and political inequality and subjugation by West Pakistan. Rubaiyat Ahmed (2012) posits, however, that the nationalist ideology and inspiration of the Liberation War as it was imagined by these founding freedom fighters and filmmakers was never quite captured in subsequent films—documentary or otherwise, but particularly in feature films, as they became increasingly commercialized. Ahmed sees a shift in Liberation War cinema between 1973 and 1976 that he characterizes depicting a moral decay among freedom fighters, many of whom abused their newfound “freedom” and were seen to have gone astray; this was sensitively portrayed in Alamgir Kabir’s *Dhire Bohe Meghna* (*Quiet Flows the Meghna*, 1973). Films such as Khan Ataur Rahman’s *Abar Tora Manush Ho* (*Regain Your Humanity*, 1973), Alamgir Kum-kum’s *Amar Jonomobhumi* (*My Birth Place*, 1973), Narayan Ghosh Mita’s *Alor Michil* (*Procession of Lights*, 1974), and Chashi Nazrul Islam’s *Shongram* (*The Struggle*, 1974) are significant in grappling with some of the unintended consequences of the war. Harunur Rashid’s *Megher Onek Rong* (*Many Colors of Clouds*, 1976) as well as Kabir’s *Dhire Bohe Meghna* were two critically acclaimed films that also diverged from some of the formative motifs of this genre. Kabir has written extensively about the social and political landscapes of the years leading up to the war as well as its aftermath, drawing attention to the failure of a nuanced cinematic treatment of the Liberation War. *Dhire Bohe Meghna* is the only feature film he made about the Liberation War—a surprising choice, given his role as a film critic, filmmaker, freedom fighter, journalist for the *Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendro*, and important figure in Bangladesh’s nationalist movement. He expressed his disillusionment with Liberation War cinema in the following quote:
One of the obstacles I faced as a filmmaker was that I was a film critic first. Therefore, I could not make a film in the same format that I had critiqued for so long. I decided to make *Dhire Bohe Meghna* in a collage format drawing from real life stories. This film was the product of great respect for our Liberation War. Yet, this was also my last film about the War. In retrospect, I can say now that I did not fully understand the War at the time. I knew the difference between what was real and what was imagined. However, back then I did not realize the difference between villains and heroes in the War. I did not understand who was a *razakar*, and who was a freedom fighter. I had not come to understand these differences immediately after the War ended. (Alamgir Kabir quoted in Khan 2018, 29; translation mine)

Importantly, Kabir in his later writings asserts that the roles of women have been grossly inadequate in Liberation War cinema. Writing about the films that were released in the aftermath of the war, *Ora Egaro Jon* and *Dhire Bohe Meghna* notwithstanding, he says: “Instead of representing the Liberation War, these films exploited one aspect of it, that of the rape of our mothers and sisters. The rape of women was used to titillate the viewers in the increasing commercialization of the film industry. Women’s sexuality was objectified for consumption and for profit” (Atikuzzaman and Paul, 202). Kabir points out that these films were, ultimately, “not successful” economically or in establishing a kind of a moral compass regarding the war. In fact, he points out the filmmakers’ lack of knowledge about the actualities of the war. Specifically, he criticizes Ali’s *Roktakto Bangla* (*Blood-Stained Bengal*), where the map of Bangladesh is literally etched with the blood of a raped woman. Even the iconic *Orunodoyer Ognishakkhi*, according to Kabir, could not escape this propensity to entrench women in the role of victim, thereby “bypassing the grave problems facing the nation and making a minor issue—that of the Birangona’s women—into a major one” (202). Notably, the Bangladeshi government bestowed on women survivors of sexual violence the honorific Birangona, meaning war heroine, in a gesture to recognize their role in the war. Kabir goes on to make a rather cryptic comment in the same essay: “One of the reasons for the lack of films about the Liberation War is those who experienced it do not feel passionately about it. And those who feel it in their heart, did not experience the War.” He goes so far as to suggest that the government should establish rules about the way the war should be memorialized. He also hints at the shifting priorities and political agendas of changing regimes, expressing skepticism about sustained government support for Liberation War memory projects.

Nevertheless, it is curious that a leading figure in the Muktijuddho and its cinema sees the problem of the Birangona as a “minor issue,” a topic un-
worthy of filmic representation. Granted, Kabir rightly takes issue with the angle in which women entered the discourse of 1971 in this genre; however, he simultaneously describes an authentic representation of 1971 as being one in which women are neither major nor minor participants. To bring clarity to Kabir’s cryptic comment, Salimullah Khan cites Ahmed Sofa, another prominent Bengali intellectual, who claims that the Liberation War has been memorialized in postindependence literature in a “ritualistic fashion” (2018, 30; translation mine); that is, the war is presented as if the mass murder and rape, the grotesque atrocities that the Pakistani soldiers committed, were the singular representation of the war. Such singular and trope-driven plots, while effective in visibilizing systemic violence, nevertheless omit the multifaceted Bengali struggle for self-determination. That grand narrative, with its intense pain, celebration, and insurgence, remains submerged by the blunt instrumentalization of rape and mass murder.

This desire for a more authentic representation of the revolutionary politics underscoring the Bengali struggle for self-determination was perhaps a central inspiration for the reinvigoration of the film society movement from the earlier preindependence period to the 1980s in Bangladesh. The assassination of Sheikh Mujib, along with eighteen members of his family at his Dhanmondi residence in August 1975, was a turning point for culture and politics in Bangladesh. Muktijuddho-centric films dwindled in quantity and quality, and critics lamented that history was being remade by the army-led governments, which made light of Bengali nationalism and, in fact, joined with antiliberation forces, namely Islamist leadership that had collaborated with the West Pakistani army during the liberation movement.

The founders and prominent contributors of Bangladesh’s film society movement—also later known as the parallel cinema movement, highlighting Bikalpa Dhara (alternative cinema)—were fresh graduates of Dhaka University who were involved in leftist politics. The group was composed of cultural activists, artists, writers, and filmmakers disheartened by the decline in the film industry. As part of the film society, they organized workshops and published newsletters. These filmmakers, including Tanvir Mokammel, Morshedul Islam, and Tareque Masud, among others, shaped parallel cinema with their 16 mm cameras and modest budgets. According to Maswood (2019), Morshedul Islam feels that “the theme of the liberation war in Bangladeshi films can only be defined as inadequate. The stories are simply absent in the most modern genre that is cinema, though the spirit of liberation war soaks the cultural core of the mainstream life in Bangladesh.” In Islam’s words, “The film industry helps build a nation” (quoted in Maswood).

Artists such as Raihan and Kabir were the inspiration and mentors for this younger generation. In a tribute to Kabir, Ananta Yusuf writes:
In the early 80s, along with a group of youngsters, Kabir initiated the film society movement. He was considered a mentor because of his refreshing perspective of films. Late Tareq Masud in his memoir, Cholochitrajatra, admits that Kabir’s contribution to his journey as a filmmaker was immense. When Tareq was making Adam Surat, Kabir stood beside him with all his resources. He gladly gave his 16 mm camera to shoot the documentary on SM Sultan. According to Tareq, Kabir was always sympathetic to the filmmakers who didn’t have money in their pockets to make a film. He wrote in his book, “He helped me in every way. To pay my gratitude I dedicated ‘Adam Surat’ to him.” (Yusuf 2014)

Kabir’s coworkers, admirers, and students aptly call him Cholochitracharya (learned person and advocate of cinema). According to documentary filmmaker and activist Manjare Hasin Murad, Kabir was swept away by the massive social, economic, and cultural developments that were profoundly transforming people in the postwar society and was able to perfectly capture it in his cinema. Moreover, he played a crucial role as a social reformist, which is why Murad believes that “the word Cholochitracharya goes well with him” (quoted in Yusuf 2014).

Muktijuddho filmmakers are frequently noted to have used their cameras as “rifles” in the face of colonial occupation. According to film critic Rukhsana Karim Kanon:

After the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, public life was engulfed in turmoil. The impassioned consciousness of the Language Movement was transformed into reality with the War of Liberation that began and ended in 1971. Thousands of innocent freedom loving Bengalis took up arms to fight for their motherland. There was one group of soldiers who fought the war not with arms and munitions. Their weapons were their writings and their photography through which they exposed to the world the bloody massacre of the Bengalis by the barbarous Pakistani military. Likewise, a few courageous filmmakers immortalized the glorious Liberation War through light-camera-action. (2015, 75)

Kanon’s observations reemphasize the intricate relationship between Muktijuddho aesthetics, politics, and infrastructure—that it purports to raise awareness about human rights and to simultaneously mobilize for justice.

Because infrastructure has been instrumental in shaping the evolution of Muktijuddho film, it is helpful to consider here the work of critical film
theorist Brian Larkin, whose studies in postcolonial African cinema demonstrate the importance of filmic infrastructures, whether technical or financial—that they determine the contours of film aesthetically, socially, and politically (2019). Larkin traces how biennials, film festivals, digital infrastructures, and videos shape viewing practices and distribution as well as mediate cultural production. He probes the distinction between textual readings and an emphasis on material and cultural infrastructures that organize the scope of film. He also illuminates a more blurred inception in African cinema that goes back to the “moment of high nationalism,” a point that is certainly instructive to Muktijuddho cinema’s trajectory. He says, “African film and media have a peculiar ontology because filmmakers producing them and scholars analyzing them have always focused beyond the film text itself and paid attention to how that text exists within a broader technical, economic, and political environment” (106). Larkin argues for a “single cinematic ecology” that is composite and encompasses film festivals, popular film theater, and the newer “enclave cinema” comprising the layered landscape of African cinema. He takes issue with scholarly discussions that undermine the less luminous productions to privilege the newer and more technically sophisticated films (i.e., New Nollywood), asserting that these contemporary international standards are complicit in the embrace of neoliberalism. He shows how high- or low-quality films are not simply an aesthetic choice of filmmakers but actually the technical aftereffect of systems of distribution. Popular cinema is often cast as technically poor, but because these films are distributed across wide strata of audiences, the poor images in some cases are “a material embodiment of their egalitarianism and accessibility” (108). Enclave cinema, on the other hand, in addition to targeting more elite audiences, is also about filmmakers trying to push African cultural production into newer terrains. Yet, Larkin argues that the older structures of open-air markets, film festivals, and biennials “comprise the infrastructure allowing images to circulate and which draw together technical, economic, institutional, and cultural forces to make the movement of images possible.” The compound effect here emphasizes that infrastructure both enables and determines culture. This is evident “in the relations between informal marketers, multiplex cinema operators, festival programmers, and art gallery curators all of whom have sophisticated ideas of the sorts of cultural forms relevant to the publics they are addressing and constituting” (115–116). This complex dimension of cinematic form and circulation is also evident in the production of Palestinian cinema, which is also seen, as discussed in the Prologue, as a site of struggle and meaning making in the face of erasure and occupation (Jankovic 2014). Drawing on the work of Tawil-Souri (2005), Jankovic characterizes the exceptional status of Palestinian cinema as it adapts according to the beleaguered struggles
it faces, its goal to illuminate significant histories otherwise absent in global or regional discourses, and the ways in which it takes shape through a range of styles, genres, funding, and production modes.

This postcolonial evolution of African cinema loosely parallels the post-independent evolution of cinema industries in Bangladesh. Lotte Hoek (2014), for instance, traces how the introduction of the capacity tax on cinema halls in 1983 had a major impact on shaping audiences across the rural/urban divide in Bangladesh. Instead of placing a tax on individual ticket sales, halls were charged a flat rate based on capacity, location, and amenities. This led to an unprecedented rise in numbers of cinema halls: 350 new halls were built between 1983 to 1988. Moreover, halls in the rural areas were subjected to a 5 percent tax in comparison to the 50 percent for urban cinema halls. The profitability occurring as a result led to wider distribution of films in the rural areas. At the same time, entertainment habits were changing and audiences—especially middle-class women—shifted more and more to home viewing.

These changes in audience were accompanied by parallel cinematic transformations as well. Hoek studies noted film critics of the 1960s and 1970s who wrote about the glory days of Bengali/Bangladeshi cinema, which harkens back to the aesthetic project of the vernacular elite that came to life in productions such as Khan’s *Mukh-O-Mukhosh* (1956) and Kabir’s *Shimana Periye* (*Beyond the Horizon*, 1977). Drawing on the work of film historian Zakir Hossain Raju (2002), Hoek surmises, “The cinema emerged as an artistic endeavor and a tool for the production of a national modernity for the Bengali middle class in East Pakistan” (2014, 19), and postindependence Muktiyuddho cinema became the grounds on which this national modernity was etched and re-etched. The aesthetic and political style of this genre took on hegemonic standards that reified cultural codes and came to symbolize an “absent fullness”—a term Hoek borrows from Laclau (2006) to denote its ubiquitous yet ephemeral quality (19). Derived from folklore, literature, and fine arts, the aesthetics of the nationalist genre rely on a “vernacular cultural model” and denote a genteel Bengali sensibility, which can be traced to the colonial period (19). In postindependent popular cinema, however, that vernacular elite cultural content gave way to what critics term “obscenity,” mainly to draw in the so-called masses. So, in post-1980s cinema, Bangladesh has witnessed not only the disappearance of the urban intelligentsia from the film industry but also an attendant sense of loss over the political project by the very same group (Hoek 2014, 24), a condition frequently lamented by the cultural critics.

The infrastructural influences on cinematic production and exhibition are evident in the art cinema landscape in Bangladesh’s own layered film ecology. A reviewer attending the Sixteenth Dhaka International Film Fes-
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tival, titled “Bangladesh: The Rising National Cinema,” conveys these assumptions about the quality of Bangladeshi film by expressing surprise at the volume of films produced in Bangladesh, and describing Bangladeshi cinema in general as “dwarfed by the monumental Indian film industry.” According to this reviewer, “To turn to the films about the dramatic history of Bangladesh is to experience less successful productions which pointed out the fact that local directors, as well as scriptwriters, have problems with the building of story arcs and dealing with time shifts and side stories” (Langerova 2018). This interpretation demonstrates the admittedly smaller scale of cinema production in Bangladesh; however, perhaps by misreading the quality as inferior it misses the nuances Larkin articulates regarding postcolonial, nationalist, and socially engaged cinema pushing newer terrains. Applying a mainstream filter and benchmark to assess Muktijuddho cinema is to miss the critical contributions of these films, whose productions are enabled by the seemingly patched-together infrastructures. Nevertheless, these films help build an archive—moreover, a disruptive archive—of Bangladesh’s independence struggle from the marginal spaces and positionalities. They enrich the Muktijuddho cinema genre, in which important films such as Yasmine Kabir’s A Certain Liberation (Shadhinota, 2003), Akhtar’s Itihaash Konna (Daughters of History, 2000), Farzana Boby’s Bish Kanta (The Poison Thorn, 2015), and Shabnam Ferdousi’s Jonmo Shathi (Born Together, 2016) are produced.

Mokammel (2017) notes the significance of this cinema in three parts: First, the stories have rarely been told and are often about marginalized people, such as in Chitra Nodir Paare (Quiet Flows the River Chitra, 1999), which tells the story of a Hindu family living in postindependent Bangladesh. Second, these films are low budget and rely on private donations. Third, they are formatted in 16 mm, which, in addition to being cost efficient, offers other benefits, including the relative freedom from government-controlled FDC policies and the flexibility of holding screenings at film festivals, where audiences can dialogue with the filmmaker and cultural critics. These films did not rely on star power; in fact, in Masud’s films ordinary folks were enlisted as actors, which added to their popular appeal. Copyrights remained with the filmmakers, and many went on to win national awards, proving that there is a hunger for realist cinema with plots that are out of the ordinary. That these films were so successful, even achieving recognition exceeding that of Bangladesh’s commercial cinema, is particularly significant, according to Mokammel.

The Absent-Present Woman in Muktijuddho Cinema

Despite the widespread recognition of many postindependence films, the absence of women as complex subjects in them—whether commercial or
parallel—is glaring. Women’s presence in this genre of film can be characterized as a “ghostly presence”—appearing in roles that serve the overarching masculinist narrative, frequently disappeared through tragic death, and haunted by sexual violation and madness. A review of extant literature on Liberation War cinema seems to unravel conversations among men, with only occasional references to women—as either exploited objects or as side characters who make gratuitous, supplementary, or typecast appearances. Rubaiyat Ahmed (2012) criticizes the industry as male dominated in every aspect. She points out that while the film society movement refrained from gratuitous roles for or the objectification of women, it nevertheless failed to create woman-centered films, let alone complex or diverse roles for women in war. The film society movement was mostly limited to an educated middle-class community—an extension of the Bengali intelligentsia who also did not portray the Liberation War in all its complexity or more explicitly beyond a middle-class cultural lens. In an article listing sixty-nine Liberation War films produced between 1971 and 2015, Kanon (2015) includes only five that are under the solo direction of a woman and three that are co-directed by a woman. These are: one commercial feature film, *Meherjaan* (2011) by Hossain; two independent feature films, *Itihaash Konna* (2000) and *Shilalipi (The Inscription)*, 2004 by Shameem Akhtar; two documentaries, *Shadhinota (A Certain Liberation)*, 2003 by Yasmine Kabir and *Ekattorer Michil (The Struggle of 1971)*, 2001 by Kabori Sarwar; and three documentaries, *Narir Kotha (Women and War)*, 2000, *Muktir Gaan (Song of Freedom)*, 1995, and *Muktir Kotha (Words of Freedom)*, 1999, codirected by Tareque and Catherine Masud. The Masuds’ filmography, in particular, is considered to be foundational to the historiography of Muktijuddho and national cinema in Bangladesh and has been the subject of several critical scholarly inquiries (Haq and Bhowmick 2014; Rubaiyat Ahmed 2013). While acknowledging their highly acclaimed oeuvre, in this book, I focus on lesser-discussed and studied films, primarily by and about women, in the interest of amplifying nondominant narratives. Since the publication of Rukhsana Kanon’s Karim’s 2015 article, at least three new documentaries by women have been released: *Rising Silence* (2019) by Leesa Gazi, *Bish Kanta (The Poison Thorn)*, 2015 by Farzana Boby, and *Jonmo Shathi (Born Together)*, 2016 by Shabnam Ferdousi. (These are the focus of Chapters 4 and 5 in this book.) In East Pakistan, the first-ever woman-directed film was *Bindu theke Britto (An Unending Circle)*, 1970 by Rebeka; even today there are still few women directors of industry-oriented films, but noteworthy ones include Nargis Akhtar, Kohinoor Akhter Suchanda, and Roji (Bhowmick 2009).

Raju argues that national cinema in Third World contexts are vehicles to engage with the predicaments of nationhood and identity within colonial and postcolonial conditions. In Bangladesh, cinema as an institution has
grown during a period of debates about nationhood, modernity, and cultural identity. Categories such as Bengalis, Bengali-Muslims, and Bangladesis have been shaped over the past century in different social, economic, and political circumstances and interacted “with and upon the roles and functions of the cinema. . . . So this cinema, by constructing ‘Bangladeshi’ identity as the one-size-fits-all umbrella for all Bengali Muslims as well as non-Muslims and non-Bengalis living in Bangladesh, worked toward imagining the sense of a Bangladeshi modernity” (2015, 3). Relatedly, Glen Hill and Kabita Chakma (2020) argue that the reification of Bengali as the dominant ethnicity, culture, and language of Bangladesh and Islam as the dominant religion serves to further marginalize attention to the diversity of the country’s ethnically distinct minorities (Hill and Chakma 2020, 77). In the Muktijuddho film genre, only one significant commercial-release film even attempts to portray the indigenous inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region of Bangladesh, home to the minority ethnic communities. *Megher Onek Rong (Many Colors of Clouds*, 1976) directed by Bengali filmmaker Harunur Rashid is set in the CHT and features an indigenous woman, Mathin (Rina Sarki) as married to a Bengali doctor Omor (Omor Elahi). Unlike the earlier practice of casting Bengali actors in the roles of indigenous characters, the film includes a number of actors from the CHT in addition to Mathin who is in one of the leading roles. The film visually portrays the landscape, agrarian life, and cultural practices of the community respectfully and with sensitivity. Nevertheless, the film also raises the question of who has the right to belong to the new nation by contesting Mathin’s allegiance to it, thereby reaffirming the central Bengali-Muslim account of nationalism.

Historical events such as the partition of the Indian subcontinent and the Muktijuddho have become touchstones in the region against which the magnitude of postcolonial suffering and loss of human life tend to be measured. Literature, memoir, and film in Bangladesh have become an appendage to the project of nation building and deeply influence how, as witnesses far removed from the time of these events, we access the attempts at eyewitness memorialization. It is important to question how national cinema about the liberation struggle—arguably the quintessential theme of national cinema in Bangladesh—has evolved in representations of gender roles and identity, particularly in times of war. In turning to films about 1971, a close viewing highlights the instability of paternalist postwar nationalism that lies at the heart of nationalist cinema and how, in remembering the war and serving as memorials to it, films also retain the ambiguity of the nationalist project.

In a study mapping a comprehensive log of Liberation War films, Kaberi Gayen (2013) looks at twenty-six full-length and seven key telefilms and, like Apon Chowdhury, categorizes them into three camps, hers being films that are set prewar, during war, and postwar. She further categorizes the films
by each decade following national independence as well as by industrial versus alternative film. She draws on alternative filmmaker Catherine Masud’s definition of “national cinema” and its quality as an authentic reflection of a country’s tradition, society, history, and culture, in all its diversity and richness. Gayen studies these films in both world cinema and Bangladesh national cinema contexts and shows that in prewar films, with few exceptions, women appear in marginal, fragmented, or supporting roles. Even though postindependence films have featured women more centrally, their representational range is limited. In broad strokes, the abject sexual victimization of women leading to loss of life (suicide or otherwise) and harm to mental stability appear to set the stage for most mainstream and even some alternative war cinema.

Nayanika Mookherjee (2015) argues that women’s wartime experiences have been memorialized in the Bangladesh public discourse in certain elite-coded ways. For instance, secular Bengali resistance has been signified by women in sari and teep participating in nationalist song and theater, a particular aesthetic that implies ethnically Bengali yet Muslim. While this is a source of pride, women’s sexual suffering is met with shameful silence or metaphorized as the plunder of the motherland. Mookherjee points out that women speaking about sexual violence in Bangladesh challenges both the aesthetic and political memorializations of the war. She documents how the narrative of the Birangona’s horrific rape is told, not forgotten or silenced, even as the complexities of her life story are occluded from the prevalent discourse of the war. It is not the knowledge of rape that brings social sanction but the speaking of it in public.

Mookherjee’s analysis of the representation of sexual violence in wartime is supported in a study by Muhammed Shahriar Haque (2015) about the discursive legitimization of rape discourse in popular cinema of Bangladesh. Haque surmises that both in popular Bollywood Hindi cinema and in the Bangladeshi film industry, popularly referred to as Dhallywood films, rape is deployed through a revenge motif (where the victim/protagonist is acted on) enacted by the male villain. He points out that in Muktijuddho-related films, as well as action-based films, although rape may not be the main theme, nevertheless it occupies a consistent subtheme (15). While a deeper and layered exploration of different facets of rape is rare in subcontinental films because of social taboo (and film censorship codes), it is seen as morally reprehensible, leading to the shame and ostracism of the victim. According to Haque, such portrayal reflects the polarized attitudes in society toward rape, victims of rape, and the rapist. This is affirmed in the acclaimed Muktijuddho cinema Guerilla (2011), which I write about in Chapter 2, where the protagonist kills herself rather than be raped by a Pakistani soldier, thus affirming the notion that death is preferable to rape. Haque goes on to con-
duct a language analysis of rape, especially in Muktijuddho but also other commercial films and identifies commonly used expressions of rape denoting strong stigma: “opobitro (impure), olokkhi (bad omen), noshto (ruined), nichu (low), joghonnno (disgusting), jaroj shontan (illegitimate child), upojukto noy (unworthy), choritro hina (characterless), kolongko (stigma), lanchhito (abused), opoya (unlucky), kolongkini bou (stained bride/wife).” Further, the meaning of rape is constructed through the use of the sound of loud diabolical laughter (of a Pakistani soldier) or pleas by the victim: “‘no, no, noooooooooo,’ ‘save me, save me,’ ‘don’t ruin me,’” as well as “intense music, pathetic music, sombre grave music, shrill heart wrenching music, crying weeping, sobbing, screaming or screams, grunts of struggle, grunts of protest” (17). Together the language and sound work to project rape through a myopic lens. Bangladesh Film Censor Board prohibits explicit sexual scenes yet a cinematic discourse operates in Muktijuddho and other popular cinema “within the cultural and censor-regulatory norms of our society, which has a deeper connotative representation” (18).

Although scholarship about film and gender/sexuality in Bangladesh remains quite thin, most comprehensive studies, Gayen’s included, draw on Raihan’s aforementioned 1970 film Jibon Theke Neya (A Glimpse of Life), one of the first and most critical representations of national cinema. The film, a political satire based on the Bengali language movement under the rule of Pakistan, represents the myriad struggles leading up to the Liberation War—labor and language, to name only two. It features a calculating autocratic woman who symbolizes the political dictatorship of Ayub Khan in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Her control of family members—her husband, two brothers, and the servants—reflects the dynamic of Ayub Khan’s rule. The film depicts two stories, running parallel to each other: As the people of East Pakistan rise in political protest in public spaces, the family members raise their voices in the domestic space against the tyrannical woman heading the household. The two brothers in the family get married, but their wives vie for the keys to the house—symbolizing control of the household. Despite several substantial roles, the women in the film are portrayed as either tyrannical and conniving or docile and self-sacrificing. Men’s and women’s roles are also starkly aligned along domestic and public spaces, with the struggle for women’s power focused on control of the home. Ultimately, the film sets up a negative relationship between women and power, where the head of the household—the tyrannical woman—is finally brought to justice in a public court by the oppressed men in the family.

Another of the first noteworthy films about the Muktijuddho is the aforementioned Ora Egaro Jon (1972), by director Chashi Nazrul Islam. Unlike some others in the national cinema genre, this highly successful film is set apart because of its multiple and diverse female characters, five of whom
have a range of significant roles. Keya is a freedom fighter and the daughter of the leader of the Peace Committee who kills her father to protect freedom fighters from Pakistani soldiers. She is eventually captured, raped, and killed. Mita is a medical student who cares for wounded freedom fighters. She too is raped and attempts suicide. Sheela is a student who is captured for information and tortured. Shabur Ma is an elderly widow who lost a son in the war. There is also an unnamed village woman who provides care and food to freedom fighters. Even though the film highlights multiple female roles, the prominent themes remain sexual victimization and shame resulting in suicide. In addition, women’s honor as well as their rehabilitation are viewed as squarely a male responsibility, and women’s suffering and shame is only recognized through validation by men. Even Mita, who is a medical student, deems her own contributions to the freedom struggle as meaningless in comparison to her lover, a freedom fighter who is seen as the worthy hero. The film raises the question of social recognition and acceptance of Birangona women despite the Bangladesh government’s recognition of women’s suffering and provision of financial and social security to them.

In analyzing that category of critical films made in the early years after the war, Gayen argues that those films made tropes of sexual violence against women. Specifically, she refers to films such as Islam’s Shonogram (1974), Ali’s Roktakto Bangla (1972), Fakhrul Alam’s Joy Bangla (Victorious Bangla, 1972), and Dotto’s Orunodoyer Ognishakkhi (1972). Women’s roles in these films are inevitably tied to sacrifice or loss of innocence leading to the loss of societal respect. Muktijuddho films were fewer in number in the post-1975 era during the period of military dictatorships, a time Gayen claims produced films less critical of the liberation movement. In the 1980s, the influence of Bombay cinema became more pervasive, as dancing and singing sequences featuring women in provocative dress in Pakistani army camps added to their sexualization. At the same time, Pakistani army officers in these films were caricatured as drunk and lascivious. In Orunodoyer Ognishakkhi, for instance, Gayen points out that one-third of the film constitutes rape scenes. This is also one of the handful of films that takes up the issue of the Juddhoshishu (war child) as the male protagonist, Anwar Hossain, appeals to the nation to accept the child of rape. Harunur Rashid’s Megher Onek Rong (1976), too, raises the issue of the war child when the mother commits suicide and the child is returned to his father. Other noteworthy films of this era are Khan Ataur Rahman’s Abaar Tora Manush Ho (1973) and Narayan Ghosh Mita’s Alor Michil (1974), both of which depict the postwar devastation, disappointment, and chaos. In these films, women are squarely returned to the domestic space as side characters.

Several alternative films have probed the association between woman and nation whereby the rape of women and plunder of a nation are intri-
cately connected. For instance, Morshedul Islam’s Agami (The Next, 1984) and Tanvir Mokammel’s Hooliya (Wanted, 1983) present sexual violence against women as a national humiliation. Women’s domestic roles are also increasingly portrayed as holding up the home space, as in Morshedul Islam’s Shortot ’71 (Autumn ’71, 2000) and Humayun Ahmed’s popular Aguner Poroshmoni (1994). A more recent film, Nasiruddin Yousuff’s Guerilla (2011), the subject of Chapter 2, is the first to center around a woman as a freedom fighter. Winner of the National Film Award, Guerilla traces the story of Bilqis Banu, a middle-class Bengali woman, whose awakening and involvement allows us the window into the unfolding freedom struggle. The film ends, however, with Bilqis’s suicide after she avenges the death of her brother and prevents her own sexual assault by a Pakistani army officer. The film’s ending—with the woman’s annihilation—is seen as preferable to rape, which is perceived as surrender to the oppressor. Throughout the film, we see a play on the title Guerilla, where presumably an innocent and docile Bengali woman is capable of acting as an insurgent in the face of personal, communal, and national threat. The motifs of women’s sacrifice and agency in death are ultimately embraced, while the question of women’s place and integration in the independent nation remains unclear.

Feminist filmmakers and scholars have long engaged with this anomalous relationship of woman to nation. Kathleen McHugh (2009) and Ella Shohat (2003) shine light on how women are both insiders and outsiders to nationalist and colonialist struggles and how a layered perspective is necessary to mount a deeper understanding of this complex and contradictory location. They broaden the discussion by placing women’s struggles within the legacy of colonial processes and the realities of globalization while also shedding light on cross-border connections in feminist film representations and interpretations. Seen within a transnational framework, women’s wartime experiences are placed at once within a national and global movement for justice that can be instrumental in mobilizing awareness, collective critique, and advocacy. However, in addition to insisting on visibility and positive representations, feminist cinema insists on the political necessity for rejecting tropes through a portrayal of diversity of experiences, and interrogating gender as a regulatory norm. Further, feminist critics bring to light the inward- and outward-looking conversations that engage not only state and military occupation but also family, kin, and community norms and strive for “an ideal of being free from scripts that define what counts as a legitimate life . . . defined here as freedom from norms” (Sara Ahmed, 2004, 151).

Feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe alerts us to the masculinist tendency of the discourses of war to generalize women as victims (and men as the militia), which diverts the gaze from exactly the “conditions and decisions” that turned them into casualties in the service of nationalist mobilization (2004,
In contrast to Enloe’s critique, which posits war as gendered in its constitution and legacy, Bangladesh film criticism has centered around the portrayal of women as victims of war. This singular focus forecloses alternative narratives to nationalistic ones; women are seen as containers of trauma with a reification of an honor-shame complex. To focus on the gendered constitution and legacy of war, however, and to interrogate the regulatory norms of gender reminds us not only that these are the result of human agency but that women had also participated as combatants—that the very term “combatants”—ought to be expanded from an exclusively militarized notion to include women who tended to wounded soldiers, served refugees, ran programs on Swadhin Bangla Betar (Free Bengal Radio Station), provided shelter, food, and clothes to the guerillas, and sent their loved ones to war. Film, then, can be an avenue for arguing against the gendered silences in the memorial process and for demystifying the normative scripts of what constitutes freedom.

Ananya Jahanara Kabir has argued that, as a genre, film functions as “testimonial narratives for survivors” (2005, 178). She suggests that films based on the partition of the Indian subcontinent provide a means for narrative integration of traumatic memory and thereby open up possibilities for mourning and reconciliation. Gayen’s study (2013) on representations of women in Muktijuddho films is one such attempt to investigate the role of national films in recuperating, creating, and engendering a sense of national history as well as looking at the diverse and important roles women have played in it. In Gayen’s book, commissioned by the Bangladesh Film Archive, she asserts that one has to ask three critical questions to assess whether films about the Muktijuddho present a shothik dharona (correct understanding), specifically around women’s diverse roles and contributions:

1. What social roles do women occupy in Liberation War films?
2. What do these cinematic representations imply about women’s place in society?
3. What modes of participation in the liberation struggle are available to women?

To this list, I add a fourth question: What are the terms through which subjects can become visible as victims/survivors of violence and agents of nation?

In the past two decades, key texts and films have appeared that disrupt the earlier narratives of suffering and bereavement and have begun to lay out a response to these questions. Among the texts are Tahmima Anam’s novel A Golden Age (2007) and its sequel The Good Muslim (2011), Nadeem Zaman’s In the Time of the Others (2018), Shaheen Akhtar’s novel The Search (2011), Bina D’Costa’s Nationbuilding, Gender and War Crimes in South Asia
(2010), Mookherjee’s *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memo-
ries, and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (2015), and Yasmin Saikia’s *Women,
films that have contributed to this new genre of cultural production—and
that build from Tareque and Catherine Masud’s groundbreaking documen-
taries of the 1990s—including the aforementioned *Guerilla* as well as the three
films under discussion in this chapter: *Itihaash Konna, Shongram 71*, and
*Meherjaan*. Together, these add to a growing tradition of writing, filmmak-
ing, theater, and television drama about the Muktijuddho in mainstream
Bangladesh media—a tradition that seeks to illuminate internal and exter-
nal tensions surrounding the representation of war, gender, memory, and
justice for a wider regional and global audience. While it is beyond the scope
of this chapter to explore the multigenre investigation of gendered experi-
ences of 1971 initiated by these texts and films, I suggest that together they
attempt to restore an ethical dimension to history and to decolonize subjec-
tivity and personal identity as well as illuminate intimate/interpersonal reck-
onings (Saikia 2011, 9). The ethical encounters staged in these films hearken
to a healing and reconciliation, especially of the contested terrain of memo-
rializing a gendered war. Like other texts I mentioned in this genre, these
films challenge a number of cherished and inherited “truths” regarding the
Bangladesh Liberation War. These texts and films, to different degrees, are
groundbreaking. They enlighten a regional and global audience on a conflict
almost entirely missing or forgotten outside of Bangladesh. In the fields of
genocide and trauma studies, very few know or discuss the history from a
Bangladeshi point of view.

Some of these texts are also provocative because they debunk a number
of national myths that have shaped the consciousness of the post-1971 na-
tion of Bangladesh. The abundance of literature generated in Bangladesh
about the war, published as memoirs, novels, district-level reports, and ac-
counts of war crimes, have narrated the war as a triumph of masculinist
liberation, by and large through stories of male valor and female victimiza-
tion—often represented as the plunder of a nation and its women. This is
true in both commercial and art films that depict the war. Thus, women’s
wartime experiences and struggles in these narratives are reduced to sexu-
al victimization and relegated as a private suffering and rendered as shame-
ful (Saikia 2011, 54). In contrast, this new genre of texts prioritizes women’s
narratives as the primary vehicle for reconstructing this forgotten history.
Unlike the predominant masculinist narratives, the female characters in
these films are agentic and project what Janell Hobson calls “embodied re-
sistance” (2008, 232). Even so, none of them represent the “emblematic sur-
vivor” of 1971 (Rothe 2011, 36). In challenging women’s representations,
these films push against masculinist visions of national cinema and broaden the narrativization to a more global genre of human rights.