The Recent Revolution on Celluloid: A Change in the Socio-Cultural Environment

Abu Saleh Md. Rafi


Abstract:
A major event in the history of Bangladesh, the liberation war of 1971 has been represented on the silver screen with passion and authenticity as well. In most cases, the representation is gendered, concentrating on the male protagonists, who fight for the country while women appear mostly as victims. However, recent films have made a step towards 'thinking otherwise'. In the recent socio-cultural context the recent filmmakers and screen playwrights approach history from a critical perspective supported by new style whether in story-telling or in the use of technology. While it is praiseworthy to 'think' new, it is at the same time necessary to understand whether the fusion of history and subjective perspectives is done with responsibility, as a minor loop-hole may have tremendous consequence. My purpose in this paper is to identify the 'newness' in the recent representation of the Liberation War in contemporary films and how this representation signifies a major change in the socio-cultural environment of the country.

Keywords:
Socio-cultural environment, thinking-otherwise, liberation-war, gender, protagonist.
1. Introduction

Commonly the portrayal of the liberation war of Bangladesh on the celluloid in Bangladeshi cinema has been so far mainly a gendered picture, concentrating only on male protagonists, who fight the battle for the sake of their motherland, where on the other hand the female characters appear mostly as tormented “war-victims.” But in recent times this common notion is to be changed as film-makers Nasiruddin Yousuff and Rubayat Hossain has put forward a totally different look to the “supposedly” familiar war story in ‘Guerilla’ and ‘Meherjaan,’ respectively. This paper tries to investigate how the representation of the liberation war of Bangladesh by Yousuff and Hossain has introduced a new change in the socio-cultural environment in the country where the audience are encouraged to “think otherwise” and the gender roles are re-defined, narratological processes are rearranged and the picturizations are distinct.

2. “Seeing Otherwise”: ‘Guerilla’ and ‘Meherjaan’

“The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important.”

(Art as a Technique, Viktor Sklovosky)

As mentioned earlier the familiar portrayal of the liberation war of Bangladesh was not the central concern of Nasiruddin Yousuff and Rubayat Hossain’s recent films ‘Guerrilla’ and ‘Meherjaan’. Rather these films attempt to open new perspectives from the typical representation of the liberation war where the dominant version has been always projected with passion and authenticity. Getting away from the earlier gender-biased projection of characters, these two film makers defamiliarize the typical representation of women by voicing it from the woman’s perspective and adopting a distinctive narratological process.
Furthermore to add with the distinctive representation of the liberation war, Yousuff fuses the context of the liberation war with his artsy from a commercial point of view, while on the other hand Hossain attempts a “counter narrative.” As a result the audience experiences a very unfamiliar projection of the liberation war, which enhances the perception of the “familiar.” In this way these filmmakers encourage the audience to “think otherwise.”

2.1. Herstory

In feminist discourse the term refers to history (re-stated as "his story") written from a feminist perspective, emphasizing the role of women, or told from a woman's point of view. In 1980s feminist especially switches its focus from attacking male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female world and outlook and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience. Then the need to construct a new canon of women’s writing by rewriting the history of the novel and of poetry in such a way that neglected women writing, was given more prominence.¹

‘Guerrilla’ and ‘Meherjaan’ can easily fall into approaches of 1980s feminist criticism. If we consider the aftermath of liberation war, we see Bengali woman’s contribution has never been projected with valour and gravity in Bangladeshi war films compared with that of their male counterparts—clearly a picture of inequity. Eminent Bangladeshi writer Humayun Ahmed in his Joshna o Jonononir Golpo is apologetic for the shortage of expression to depict the story of the women of our glorious liberation war. Similarly Yousuff, the director of ‘Guerrilla’ states—

In all the eleven sectors throughout the war, countless women actively took part in the war and sacrificed their lives as fearlessly as their male counterparts. But when it comes to documentation, whether historical or artistic, all we find is an incomplete list of rape victims who were too badly treated after the war. Well, then what about the real female fighters? Have we ever paid a tribute to their
immense contribution? That’s why I’ve cast a strong female fighter as my protagonist. ²

The protagonist of his film ‘Guerrilla’ is Bilkis who loses her husband on the night of 25 March, 1971. Determined to seek revenge, Bilkis starts taking part in the operations against the Pakistani occupation forces along with the freedom fighters. She also becomes involved with Guerrilla, an underground English newspaper, which was published from Dhaka. As the story moves forward, the life of Bilkis, a representative of the women guerrilla folk who were tortured by the Pakistani forces and their aides in 1971, begins to unfold.

In ‘Meherjaan,’ on the other hand, Hossain constructs the canon of women’s writing through Meher’s diary which Showalter calls ‘Gynocritics’ where “the woman is the producer of textual meaning” including the “psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the career and the literary history.” Meher’s diary is here the ‘Gynocritics’ which controls all the actions of film that comes out in Meher’s oral depiction to her cousin Neela’s daughter Sarah, who was given away for adoption who comes back to piece together her past. This diary contains Meher’s individual history in parallel with the nation’s history. It reveals the fact that during the war in 1971, Meher falls in love with a soldier from the enemy-side. When her love is discovered, she is shamed and silenced by her family and society. Today 38 years after the war, Meher has this visitor Sarah, whom she cannot turn down. Here the director has tried to depict the Liberation War through the perspective of three strong women—Meher, Neela and her daughter Sarah, as against the usual trend of presenting the war through the “male” perspective. Hossain explains that she wanted to portray Neela as a strong woman who tries to live through her stigma of being physically abused by Pakistani soldiers instead of succumbing to it. ³

Therefore both the films open up a conversation to explore the woman’s story and their perspectives of the liberation war against the traditional ‘male’ perspective. The feminists call it ‘Herstorical point of view’ which is uniquely different from the other stories of our liberation war that we are more commonly used to seen on the celluloid.
2.2. Narratological Approach

According to Gabriel Miller “‘the novels’ characters undergo a simplification process when transferred to the screen, for film is not very successful in dealing either with complex psychological states or with dream or memory, nor can it render thought.” But, Yousuff’s ‘Guerrilla’ proves Miller’s statement wrong, which demonstrates an assumption that fiction deals with psychological dramas, thought, dream and memory in a transparent way that needs no artificial meditation. This assumption that fiction is more ‘complex’ than film is another way of privileging ‘art’ in fiction and undermines the possibility of serious study of the verbal, visual and audio registers of the film, as well as suggesting that film is incapable of metaphor or symbolism. Here Yousuff has proved his craftsmanship applying a series of metaphors and allegories. Though Yousuff’s ‘Guerrilla’ takes a linear narrative following its tagline “A film about liberation war” it captures only a fragmented part of the war which does not even show the conclusion of the war and the final victory of the nation. But symbolically it tries to cover everything by symbols and allegories to bridge the between the time-space and his own narrative technique, which counters Miller’s argument. Hence, the film does not need to be extended to December—till the end of the war, rather it ends all of a sudden in August.

Among the symbols and allegories in the film one cannot but notice the overshadowing of a gloomy atmosphere, in the second part of the film, which is marked by a dearth of sunlight. In fact, throughout the film, the sky overhead is overcast, an effect which is perfectly consistent with the sheer uncertainty of a nation reeling under the ominous dark clouds. In this part, Bilkis is seen fleeing by a train to her ancestral home in a village where her brother, Khokon, a commander of the freedom fighters, lives. This journey becomes the most sustaining allegory in this film, representing the uncertainty hanging over the nation and the victimization of its people.
Compounded with allegory is Yousuff’s use of excellent poetic images in the shape of flashbacks of childhood, the bright colours of which instantly form a contrast with the present where there is no bright colour. His use of myth, especially the one about a sibling’s transformation into a bird after death, lends insight into the culture of the country.

In contrast, following its tagline “History is not a coherent narrative” ‘Meherjaan’ approaches nonlinearly through the flashback of its heroine Meherjaan’s recalling of wartime with her maternal niece Sara. This narrative moves back and forth and captures more about the war of different ideologies than the actual combats that took place in 1971 Bangladesh. The interactions among Freedom fighters, the communists and the seekers of reconciliation show this dilemma very well. As far as love is concerned, the image of “the Knight and his girl” portrays the teenage emotion which disregards the surrounding realities. The story is told from a perspective that has never been dealt before, the dilemma of social leaders, the fact that people did not cease to be human beings just because a war is taking place and people are taking sides. The perspective is attempted here for the first time and also the back and forth narrative technique, which contains two contexts of two different time and space.

2.3. Defamiliarization Technique

Viktor Sklovosky in his *Art as a Technique* expresses—

Anyone who knows Tolstoy can find several hundred passages in his work where his method of seeing things out of their normal context is so apparent. Tolstoy described the dogmas and rituals he attacked as if they were unfamiliar, substituting everyday meanings for the customarily religious meanings of the words common in church ritual. Many persons were painfully wounded; they considered it blasphemy to present as strange and monstrous what they accepted as sacred. Their reaction was due chiefly to the technique through which Tolstoy
perceived and reported his environment. And after turning to what he had long avoided, Tolstoy found that his perceptions had unsettled his faith. (15)

The technique of defamiliarization is nothing new. But in Bangladeshi context, Hossain applies this technique for the first time in ‘Meherjaan’ to encounter the grand narrative of the nation’s liberation war through her outlandish love-story and faces almost similar criticism that Tolstoy had faced then. As Pablo Casals said, “The love of one’s country is a splendid thing. But why should love stop at the border?” Having this notion in mind Hossain’s film “Meherjaan” breaks the border bringing the people together under the magic of love. “Meherjaan” portrays the emotional aspects of human psyche where people are in war fight and kill each other, but the only thing remains is the purity of love. Following the tagline of the film “Loving the other” Hossain creates a love story in the backdrop of the war, but there is little of war in it. She tries to provide a post-nationalist perspective of 1971, by valorizing the everyday politics of the villagers and also emphasizes on looking at the liberation through the eyes of the women who loves a Baloch Army, Washim, who rescues her from a rape attempt. Again this Washim rejects to support his own army when he realizes the shameless ferocities they are doing in Bangladesh. Interestingly, this film pronounces the necessity of loving the “other” in a rather more atypical way that projects all the sensual aspects of feminine love ignoring the horror of the war (upon which the story is supposedly based). Meherjaan, the protagonist of the film falls in love with an enemy soldier while living in the same home with her cousin Nila. Her character symbolizes the symbol of love, but in the wrong time of the history. She is educated, peaceful and against war. But despite being educated, she is totally unaware of the national demand of independence and the reasons behind that. This projection somehow might remind of a typical Indian films’ romance genre, where the war is between the families in the backdrop, and the lovers are courting aside. Criticisms aside, this surely is a new way of projecting the war in the cinema of Bangladesh.

Again, I find strong resemblances of Hollywood action films with that of ‘Guerilla’, where the heroine is to bring justice and is involved with serious action. The
protagonist of ‘Guerilla’ disguises herself, provides grenades and explosives to co-fighters, deceives the high-ups of the army and sets a bomb there that explodes minutes after her departure. Even at the end of the film she manages to set the army camp on fire through her hand bomb. All this action pack thriller-drama has been technically done in a real Hollywood style. The violent portrayal of gruesome killing also reminds us of any Hollywood thriller film. Even the Bengali soundtrack in the film is also influenced by Western compositions. In total, this film, portraying the 1971 liberation war, is actually demonstrating a whole new 21st century stylish action thriller as a genre, which also is very new way of defining the liberation war on the celluloid in Bangladesh.

3. Thinking Otherwise/Likewise

“In this film I’ve clearly shown who our enemies were and who were friends” when Yousuf says this about his film ‘Guerrilla’, Hossain on the other hand, is dreaming about a world without borders under one umbrella called “love.” From that perspective we can say that Yousuf’s ‘Guerrilla’ is an assessment to the grand narrative of liberation war, where Hossain’s romantic love story encounters it. As said earlier, Guerrilla uses distinct female protagonist in an action-pack Hollywood style canvas, which is quite new and in some cases aberrant if we consider the setting to the film. However, giving an emphasis to a female character and not making her a typical war-effected rape victim, the director actually empowers the women, not projecting them necessarily naïve and vulnerable.

Similar to ‘Guerilla,’ ‘Meherjaan’ also magnifies the role of women and gives a strong voice to the female characters. Then again, highlighting the idea of love and not concentrating fully on the most emotional and glorious part of the nation—“the liberation war” itself, the director of ‘Meherjaan’ has been criticized for injuring the public sentiment. This type incident might be the first in the history of Bangladeshi film industry, if not in the world. This reminds of Quentin Tarantino’s cod-second world war adventure ‘Inglorious Bustard’ where Hitler was burnt alive in the movie theatre. The film ‘Meherjaan’ also had been pulled down from screening due to crude public criticism. But
in my eyes, what is left unnoticed is the fact that the director picks an opposition-army who realizes the wrongdoings of his own country. To respond to his conscience he does not bother to risk his own life in the land of enemies for abandoning his own gang. This way the director turns the enemy into a “hero” which actually glorifies the liberation war itself by making the Hero “understand” and being able to “love,” other than kill, hate or rape. However, the audience in the country might still not be ready to accept counter-narratives of our own history, even though we happily accept love-affairs with opponent-nationalities in Indian mainstream films like ‘Veer-Jaara,’ ‘Lagan’ or ‘Rang-de Basanti,’ where British–Indian or Pakistani-Indians are in love. This indicates on the cultural phenomenon of our social environment. The director of ‘Meherjaan’ also picks a wrong time to release such a delicate post-nationalistic view of the liberation war in the country when the nation is demanding trials of the war-criminals. However, this film surely defamiliarizes the portrayal of the liberation war by deriving a new perspective out of it.

4. Conclusion

By portraying the glorious liberation war filming it with advanced technology in ‘Guerrilla,’ offering thought provoking insights in ‘Meherjaan’, and above all giving a strong voice to the female counterparts is a new step ahead to see and think otherwise about the glory of liberation war in Bangladeshi cinema. Indeed film making is a risky business and very few in our country dare to denote a notion of defamiliarization against the typically “familiar” projection, however it is a noteworthy change in the context of our socio-cultural environment that the recent film-makers are daring to “Think otherwise” and show different perspectives of the great history of our country. The aspiration and the dare to “think otherwise” should stand strong. If so, then someday in near future Bangladeshi film industry will be able to uphold the glorious national history of our country in front of the world audience with larger definitions and interesting interpretations.
Notes:

1 See Peter Barry *Beginning Theory*, 117.


3 Hossain says this in an interview for *The Daily Star* on 14 January 2011.

4 See Gabriel Miller *Adaptations*, 6.

5 As quoted in *Joys and Sorrows: Reflections by Pablo Casals as told to Albert E. Kahn* (1974) by Albert E. Kahn

6 Yousuff says this in an interview titled “*Guerrilla: The making of an Epic*” published in *The Daily Star* on May 6, 2011.

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