



Mrityunjay Devvrat's *Children of War* (2014): A Cinematic Representation of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971

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ABSTRACT

The Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 was a horrific incident in the history of South Asia. The war started when the West Pakistani soldiers attacked the ordinary people of former East Pakistan on the 25th of March in 1971. The Pakistani military committed this genocide under Yahya Khan's order to kill millions of Bengali civilians. The debutant director, Mrityunjay Devvrat, has recreated the incidents of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War in his film *Children of War* (2014). He has arranged the plot into three portions that capture the life of a devastated journalist, Aamir, during the war; his wife, Fida, whom Pakistani soldiers have kept in a military camp with other women; and the struggle of two siblings, Rafiq and Kausar, who are trying to flee to India. These fictional characters are portrayed in a very realistic way against the backdrop of the war. Therefore, the present paper attempts to analyze the cinematic recreation of innumerable atrocities, rape, sufferings, and traumatized conditions of Bangladeshi civilians by the Pakistani soldiers during nine months of the war.

Introduction:

World cinema features a plethora of war films, some inspired by historical conflicts such as the Vietnam War, the First World War, the Second World War, and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Benjamin de Carvalho, in the article "War Hurts: Vietnam Movies and the Memory of a Lost War",



writes, “Any discussion of warfare must be mindful of the processes at play in the constitution of collective memory. The collective memory of wars is today largely shaped by representations of warfare in popular culture” (951). War Film is a medium of popular culture which fantastically represents the collective memories of warfare. Mrityunjay Devvrat’s *Children of War* (2014) is a Hindi movie set against the backdrop of the Bangladesh Liberation War. The debutant director was born in Bangladesh while his parents were working there, and he spent his childhood there until the age of six. After reading Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s autobiography, *The Unfinished Memoirs* (2012), he felt interested in making a film on the Liberation movement. He did not get permission from the Bangladesh government to shoot the movie there, so he recreated a replica of Bangladesh in various parts of India. The film very cautiously highlights the genocide of 1971, the rape of women in the military camps, and the plight of Bengali civilians during the nationwide crisis.

Subhra Gupta, in his movie review, “Children of War: There should have been more history”, writes, “Bangladesh came into being in 1971, amidst large-scale violence. *Children of War* (2014) attempts to recreate that terrifying, tumultuous time through personalized stories of the victims and aggressors.” The plot of the movie can be divided into some parts, such as the devastating life of Aamir, who is a journalist; the horrific condition of his wife, Fida, as a rape victim in the military camp of Pakistani soldiers; two siblings, Rafiq and Kausar’s journey toward India for a safer place and the brutalities of the Pakistani Army on Bangladeshis. The beautiful shooting spots, background music, stunning performances of all the characters, and fantastic cinematography make it a unique war film.

Under Yahya Khan’s orders, the Pakistani army launched an operation known as ‘Operation Searchlight’ against the inhabitants of the erstwhile East Pakistan on the evening of March 25, 1971. Jyoti Sen Gupta, in his book *History of Freedom Movement in Bangladesh*, writes, “It was past midnight. The sky over Dacca was lit up with fire raging in residential areas. Rattles of machine-guns, blasts of bombs, and wailing noise of rockets turned the capital into a theatre of war. Cries of men, women, and children hit by bullets and shells rent the sky.” (Sen Gupta 278). The movie recreates the brutalities of the Pakistani army on the common people of East Pakistan in a very realistic way. Sarmila Bose in her article “Anatomy of Violence: Analysis of Civil War in East Pakistan in 1971”, says, “East Pakistan in 1971 was simultaneously a battleground for many different kinds of violent conflict - militant rebellion, mob violence, military crackdown on a civilian population, mutiny within the armed forces, urban terrorism, guerrilla warfare, conventional battles, death squads...” (Bose 4463). Pakistani forces slaughtered millions of Bangladeshis over nine months of attacks. The filmmaker attempts to capture the miserable, powerless living conditions of common people in former East Pakistan. Anam Zakaria, in her book *1971:*



A People's History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, says, “According to several Bangladeshi estimates, 30 lakh people were killed and as many as 2,00,000–4,00,000 women were raped in 1971” (Zakaria 10). To resist the atrocities, Bangladeshi civilians participated in the war as freedom fighters or *Muktijoddhas*, and they fought with bravery against the Pakistani army. The bravery of the Bengali independence warriors is also shown to us in this movie in a very realistic manner. Bengali nationalism was so strong at the time that it could sustain people’s inspiration and commitment to the cause throughout the national crisis. The Bengalis fought for their vision of a nation-state and identified themselves as a community. Benedict Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, describes the idea of the nation, saying, “...it is an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 6). This film exquisitely highlights the Liberation War and its horrific scenes.

At the beginning of the movie, Yahya Khan’s infamous line, “Kill three million of them, and the rest will eat out of our hands”, appears on the screen. The next scene portrays excerpts from Indira Gandhi’s interview, where she mentions that the massacre began long before there was a single guerrilla and how India participated in the war and stopped the killings. India’s contribution to the war was precious, and after being united with Bangladeshi freedom fighters, they were able to destroy the Pakistani soldiers, and on the 16th of December, Bangladesh became independent. M. Rafiqul Islam, in his book *The Bangladesh Liberation Movement*, describes, “However the fourteen days of open war between the Pakistan army and the allied forces of India and Bangladesh in the eastern sector concluded on 16 December 1971. The Pakistan army and its auxiliary forces surrendered unconditionally in Dacca to the allied forces. Thus, Bangladesh was physically liberated” (Islam 30). The bulk of the film focuses on the lives of journalist Aamir (played by Indraneil Sengupta) and his wife, Fida (played by Raima Sen). At night, when they were together at their home, suddenly, a group of Pakistani soldiers entered their house and attacked them. Mr. Malik, a Pakistani army officer (played by Pavan Malhotra) uttered abusive words, captured Aamir and brutally raped Aamir’s wife in front of him. After this incident, we find Fida in a military camp in a very traumatized and devastated condition, captured with other helpless women. In utter desperation, pain and trauma, Aamir joins the *Mukti Bahini* (freedom fighters) with some other civilians to rescue his wife and kill the Pakistani soldiers.

After a long time, we get the actor Farooq Shaikh in this film in a pivotal role. He played the role of a leader of the group of freedom fighters and is seen making strategies for attacking the Pakistani soldiers. In a scene, we see that Bhitika, a rape victim (played by Tilottama Shome), brings much ammunition from the camps of Pakistani soldiers and offers it to the *Mukti Bahini*. One day, they



destroyed a car which was carrying some Pakistani soldiers with landmines. Yasmin Saikia, in her book *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh*, mentions, “In East and West Pakistan, the two groups fought with each other to correct the history they inherited from the British and sought to create an identity for ensuring the future and, in consequence, transformed themselves into victims and perpetrators” (Saikia 10). Although the movie does not portray battle scenes like other commercial movies, it offers only glimpses of *Mukti Bahini*’s bravery. Aamir also killed some traitors who were *Razakars*, the Bengalis who supported and helped the West Pakistani soldiers. The film recreates scenes from nine months of the Liberation War, but somehow lacks the depth of representation of battle scenes or guerrilla warfare.

The film also depicts the plight of defenceless Bengali women in the military barracks of West Pakistani troops. They were detained as prisoners, and day and night, vicious rapes by Pakistani forces occurred there. Fida and a few other women suffer trauma since Fida, too, becomes a victim of rape. Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman, in their book *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, also write, “In every militarised society, war zone, and refugee camp, violence against women and men is part of a broader continuum of violence that transcends the simple diplomatic dichotomy of war and peace” (Giles and Hyndman 3). The primary goal of the Pakistani soldiers was to conceive those Bangladeshi women in order for them to have Pakistani-born children. The barbed wire decorations used by the director to adorn the facilities give them an appearance reminiscent of Nazi concentration camps. Fida keeps her journal private and writes about her experiences as a rape survivor. In any war, women always become the victims and suffer a lot, and for this reason, during the Liberation War of Bangladesh, Pakistani soldiers tortured and raped millions of Bangladeshi women. Rape victims suffered greatly after the war since no one was willing to marry them, and their families shunned them. In the book *The Voices of War Heroines: Sexual Violence, Testimony, and the Bangladesh Liberation War*, Fayeza Hasanat mentions, “War is not a gender-neutral concept. Sexual violence as a weapon of war is not a random act. It is a systemic and pervasive action that is carried out as a deliberate policy” (Hasanat 1).

The movie’s plot also centres on two siblings, Rafiq (played by Riddhi Sen) and Kausar (played by Rucha Inamdar), who are hiding in a forest and have no food. Their parents, along with other family members, were killed by the Pakistani soldiers. Suddenly, one night, they return to their village and witness that all the villagers have been killed, and they bury the dead bodies. One day, some refugees came to their village to stay for one night, and the next day, the siblings accompanied them on their journey to Indian refugee camps. They wanted to migrate to India, leaving their homes in former East Pakistan in search of a new, safer place. Ngwenya et al. in their article “Making sense of uncertainty: The



precarious lives of young migrants from rural Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa”, write, “Migration whether local or across borders essentially means leaving a community which one knows and belongs to, to being the ‘other’ in a new place” (1). But on their way, suddenly Pakistani soldiers attacked and killed them, but Rafiq and his sister managed to remain alive. After that, they again start their journey in a boat. While riding the boat, Kausar, being traumatized, sees the hallucinations of many characters who work as the embodiment of the common people of Bangladesh. Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Memory, and History* defines trauma in this way, “...the Greek trauma, or “wound,” originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body. In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud’s text, trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth 3). Through this movie, Mrityunjay Devvrat tries to represent the traumatized conditions of rape victims and refugees who attempted to flee from Bangladesh.

Rafiq possesses bravery and would stop at nothing to save his sister. In one particularly brutal moment, we witness him brutally murdering a Pakistani soldier, which expresses Rafiq’s resentment towards the man. They face several horrors, tribulations, and impediments on their voyage, but never give up. As defenceless twins during the Liberation War, the director masterfully portrays their helpless situation. He has used the flashback technique to capture Rafiq’s nostalgia for his lost family. The extraordinary devotion and affection between Rafiq and his sister Kausar are depicted brilliantly in the film. However, a very terrible incident occurs at the conclusion of the film when a Pakistani soldier kills Rafiq as they are set to cross into India. Since his brother is her sole hope, Kausar is crushed by his untimely death. Rafiq and Kausar’s fictitious story parallels the experiences of several defenceless siblings seeking safety amid a national emergency.

Mrityunjay Devvrat skilfully recreates the suffering of refugees in Bangladesh throughout the nine months of the war. Zaglul Haider, in the article “A Revisit to the Indian Role in the Bangladesh Liberation War”, writes, “During the nine-month Liberation War, about 10 million Bengali refugees fled into India, which caused serious concern for India” (540). One such refugee group, which includes children, pregnant women, older people, and cattle, is depicted in the movie. Veteran actor Victor Banerjee plays Baba, a leader of a group of refugees heading towards India. However, they discover Pakistani forces one night and take refuge in the bush. Following the slaughter of their cows, the troops were distraught and resumed their journey. As they were resting by a pond, however, Pakistani forces suddenly attacked and mercilessly murdered every one of them. One will experience intense emotion while watching the film because of this heartbreaking event. In his review “Children of War: Oppressing issues,” Baradwaj Rangam explains, “Children of War is exquisitely shot – there isn’t a single lazy



frame. Soldiers of the Pakistani Army halt a bus carrying Bangladeshis and order them to run across a bridge. At the other end, more soldiers lie in wait, with rifles.”

In the movie, the brutal attitude that Pakistani forces had towards the people of Bangladesh is depicted in a highly explicit way. In one instance, we saw a bus full of Bangladeshi civilians being driven to a safer location when, out of nowhere, the Pakistani military took control of the vehicle and opened fire on the passengers. This type of horrible death occurs on a bridge as well. The scenario is recorded in slow motion, feeling real and deadly. Rounaq Jahan, in her book *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration*, mentions, “...the savage brutalities of the Pakistan army and the genocidal nature of their killings aroused a keen sense of unity among the Bengalis, broke down primordial sentiments, and stiffened their resistance. It was looked upon not only as a struggle for liberation but as a struggle for the survival of a people” (Jahan 203-04). According to the director, the primary intention of the Pakistani soldiers was to impregnate Bengali women so that they could not forget the physical and mental scars after the war. When the war came to an end in December 1971, many Bangladeshi women became pregnant, and the film also portrays Fida and other women in their pregnancy at the end of the film.

Devvrat has also added some cinematic embellishments to the storyline of this fictitious account of the Bangladesh Liberation War. The son of Aamir and Fida, the war child, is one example of such a representation. However, he plays a youthful leader in the movie who speaks to large audiences. When we first encounter him in the film, he speaks out to defend his compatriots against those who have corrupted them. Through him, the director used *Joy Bangla*, one of the Bangladesh Liberation War’s rallying cries, to spread the Bengali consciousness. The filmmaker has used him as an embodiment of young Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Through this film, he tried to convey that the children of war also support the newly emerged Bangladesh and can be good human beings. The film also highlights the tumultuous conditions of the country in the aftermath of the Liberation War. It is evident from the speech of Aamir’s son that many *Razakars* or traitors are hidden among them and are looting their nation, and they must protect the country from these traitors.

Conclusion:

The fact that it is a Hindi movie is one of the film’s shortcomings. Bengali is the language of Bangladesh, as evidenced by many of the film’s characters speaking it. This is why it would have been preferable if the Bengali language had been the director’s choice for the movie’s medium of language. To recreate the atmosphere of the Liberation War and the suffering of the common people during the national crisis, the director used Bengali conversations and folk music as background. Another



shortcoming of the film is that it does not delve deeply into the history of the Liberation War. Therefore, we can conclude that Mrityunjay Devvrat, as a debutant director, has done his level best to recreate the historical period of Bangladesh in 1971 through his artistic and cinematic approach. He has assembled an ensemble cast that has delivered their best performances. By creating the fictional plot, he has given us a different glimpse of a film based on the Bangladesh Liberation War. It highlights human sufferings, mental trauma, helplessness, and emotional crisis during the nine months of the War. The visuals and sounds of the film differ from those of so-called war movies and are praiseworthy. The film has various artistic layers, making it worth watching a movie. In short, despite having some flaws, *Children of War* (2014) will forever remain a precious document of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.

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