

SEXISM IN ‘ONLINE WAR’: AN ANALYSIS OF ONLINE DISCURSIVE BATTLE OF SHAHBAG PROTEST 2013 IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

This research is about the discursive battle between radical Bengali nationalists and the Islamist supporters of accused and convicted war criminals in Bangladesh where the gendered issues are used as weapons. In Bangladesh, the online discursive frontier emerged from 2005 as a continuing battle extending from the 1971 Liberation War when the punishment of war criminals and war rapists became one of the central issues of political and public discourse. This online community emerged with debate about identity contest between the Bengali nationalist ‘pro-Liberation War’ and the ‘Islamist’ supporters of the accused war criminals. These online discourses created the background of Shahbag protest 2013 demanding the capital punishment of one convicted criminal and at the time of the protest, the online community played a significant role in that protest. In this research as a past participant of Shahbag protest, I examined this online discourse and there gendered and masculine expression. To do that I problematized the idea of Bengali and/or Muslim women which is related to the identity contest. I examined that, to protest the misogynist propaganda of Islamist fundamentalists in Bangladesh, feminists and women’s organizations are aligning themselves with Bengali nationalism and thus cannot be critical about the gendered notions of nationalism. I therefore, tried to make a feminist scholarly attempt to be critical of the misogynist and gendered notion of both the Islamists and Bengali nationalists to contribute not only a critical examination of masculine nationalist rhetoric, but will also to problematize that developmentalist feminist approach. I believe a meticulous feminist analysis of Bangladeshi nationalism is important within the feminist critical debates and the online sphere as a significant zone of discursive formation and power relations to analyze that national rhetoric.

For my daughter *Diotima Doria*
For her love and support I dare to dream

And,
Special gratitude to my mentor for making me write this thesis with her constant support, advice
and care

Professor Elissa Helms

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First Chapter

Introduction

In this research, I will analyze the internet based discursive battle between radical Bengali nationalists and the Islamist supporters of accused and convicted war criminals in Bangladesh to understand how the gendered issues like war rape, adultery, women's proper dress codes and sexuality have been constructed and abused as weapons. In Bangladesh, the online discursive frontier emerged from 2005 as a continuing battle extending from the 1971 Liberation War when the punishment of war criminals and war rapists became one of the central issues of political and public discourse. The issue of the punishment of war criminals was rooted in the debate about national identity which emerged out of the complex history of Bangladesh after the end of British colonial rule and following the 1971 Liberation War for independence from Pakistan. Defining national identity between Bengali ethno-linguistic identity and Muslim religious identity has been the key point of that debate that is rooted in the political trajectory of Bangladesh.

Since the inception of interactive and participatory Bengali blogging in 2005, a discursive online community of privileged groups, mostly of educated, urban, male internet users, has been created. From them the sharp distinction emerged in cyber sphere with the ideological debate between the Bengali nationalist 'pro-Liberation War' and the supporters of the accused war criminals of *Jamat*¹ since that debate was the most prominent discourse in the socio-political arena (M. Z. Chowdhury

¹ *Jamat (Jamat-I- Islami)* is one of the major Islamist political parties which was against the Liberation war and most of the leaders of them are accused and convicted as war criminals for supporting the genocide and war rape. However, they gained acceptance from the fundamental Muslims because of the religious belief. They also became stronger through the political uses of Islam and the electoral coalitions with the main political parties. Now they are in coalition with the main opposition party which is Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP).

2014). These online discourses came up with sexist slur words to degrade their opponents and define these two sides. The *Jamati* bloggers focused on issues like women's body, appearance and sexuality in accusing secular Bengali nationalists of adultery and unacceptable sexual behaviors according to Islam in addition to denouncing them for being atheist. On the other hand, to be against the Islamist discourse, the Bengali nationalists' online community also came up with masculine and aggressive discourse that made use of sexist language.

In this context, on 2009 the war crime tribunal was established. Abdul Quader Molla (known as butcher Molla), assistant secretary general of Jamat, was convicted in the noon of February 5, 2013 and sentenced to life imprisonment instead of capital punishment. To protest the verdict of lifetime imprisonment Abdul Quader Molla who is of one of the main convicted war criminals from 1971, on the same day at evening, the Bengali nationalist online activists called a demonstration in a central place in the capital of Dhaka, Shahbag Square, to demand instead the death sentence.² From the next day, this demonstration soon became a huge continuous gathering of protesting people for almost three months and became a leading news story in the international media. Although the protest was initiated by online activists, and they took the leading role in decision making, this protest became a place of all progressive people and civil society organizations with varied ideological and political positions. However, they all were united in demanding proper punishment of the war criminals and thus aligned themselves with Bengali nationalist online activists. With many layers of plurality and political dynamics, the protest and its reaction divided the political discourses more sharply between the two opposite poles of power, one Islamist and the other

² Shahbag Square is one of the central squares of the capital with the concentration of main Public Universities, Art Institute, book fairs and central book market which made it as a regular meeting point of students, teachers, writers, artists and activists. It is also used to be a place of resistance for decades where intellectuals, activist, civil society organizations, artists protest different causes of social inequality and injustice.

secular nationalist. While the protest was going on, the protestors established a tent in Shahbag Square with several computers and named it “Cyber War.” Inside and online they were attacking *Jamati* and Islamist propaganda.

In the whole mapping of this protest, young women were the lead vocalists for slogans on the square itself. The huge and spontaneous participation of women in this protest led the media and public discourses to define it as a progressive historical event for women. However, women did not play any part in the decision making; neither in Shahbag Square, nor in the online part of the battle. Women’s participation was limited only to an auxiliary role in the protest and was used as a weapon in the online discursive battle. Young women’s prominent resistant appearance in public demonstrations of Shahbag protest, staying in the street all night with their male comrades became one of the vital issues of debate. The pictures of the resistant women became the subject of online manipulations by *Jamati* online propaganda. In contrast, in defense of this propaganda, vulgar slang with reference to sexuality was used by the online nationalist activists. Therefore in this research and as a past participant in the Shahbag protests, I want to examine the online discourses in cyberspace as a weapon to fight between Islamist and nationalist positions in context of the protest. Moreover, I will contextualize this gendered online discourse in the historical construction of the idea of Bengali Muslim women to understand the relation between those. To do that, I will also analyze the feminists’ positions those are allied with Shahbag protest to examine the nationalist and feminist alliance to contribute a scholarly feminist critique of Bengali nationalism which is not voiced strongly in Bangladesh.

Through this analysis I want to argue that, to protest the misogynist propaganda of Islamist fundamentalists in Bangladesh, feminists are making the alliance with Bengali nationalism and

thus cannot be critical about the gendered notions of nationalism that are embedded in Bengali nationalism. I therefore, want to make a feminist scholarly attempt to be critical of the misogynist and gendered notion of both the Islamists and Bengali nationalists of Bangladesh to contribute not only a critical examination of liberal masculine nationalist rhetoric, but will also to problematize that feminist approach. I believe a meticulous feminist analysis of Bangladeshi nationalism is important within the feminist critical debates and the online sphere as a significant zone of discursive formation and power relations to analyze that national rhetoric.

Objectives of the research:

1. To understand the gendered elements in the discursive battle between the two ideological poles and how they were constructed as opposed to each other, and how the women's body and sexuality played the role in this contest.
2. To relate the images of 'ideal' Bengali and Muslim women to understand the sexist assumptions of the online battle and how this is related to the 'real' protest and politics.
3. To analyze the relationship of feminists and women's organizations of Bangladesh with Shahbag protest and Bengali nationalism.

Methods

The research idea was based on my experience of active participation in the Shahbag protest. At the time, I collected some interviews of people who participated there for my further research. However, I did not use these in my analysis directly in this research. This research was mainly focused on the online discourse about Shahbag protest. Therefore the main research method was

discourse analysis of some prominent Bengali blogs of Bangladesh those are active from 2005, and Facebook pages in 2013 and 2014 since numbers of Facebook pages were created and became very active in the issue of Shahbag protest. Most of the online writings are in Bengali, I translated it in this thesis. Moreover I sometimes gathered information from some major actors of the Shahbag protest and influential bloggers by contacting them online to clarify the data and they helped me by providing information.

Ethical Issues and Self-reflexivity

In this research I didn't use any actual name of the actors that I examined critically to avoid any personal harm to them. This was also not important, because my focus was not on the individual perception, rather, I used selective representational comments and statements to analyze those since those have contributions to a larger debate about the issues of war crime tribunal, Shahbag protest, Bengali nationalism and *Jamat-I-Islam*. Behind the selection of the text the main consideration was that, those texts are representing the dominant way of thinking about these issues or not.

Moreover, my focus in this research was limited only on the gender aspect of the discursive battle. Therefore, I didn't include several other vital aspects and debates related to the Shabag protest, like the issue of believer vs. atheism, and the political violence related to Shabag protest in my analysis. Moreover, this research is not an historical reconstruction of Shahbag protest, which requires the rigorous research and putting light upon every sectors of it. I only focused on the elements that relied on gendered language in online sphere and the feminist alliance of Shahbag protest.

As an active participant of Shahbag protest my subjectivity is crucial for this research. While I participated this protest, with my subjective position as an academic anthropologist and as a feminist, I was aware that I wanted to use my experience and observation of that protest in my

further analysis and research. At that time, it was not confirmed that I will going to do that research as the MA thesis in CEU in Gender Studies. However, I had planned to do my own research and analysis on my participation and experience of Shahbag protest. I therefore did some interviews. However, while I was in Shahbag protest, my subjectivity of a researcher most often became secondary while my active participation of that protest became the vital one. Therefore there was a constant dilemma of how to position myself, whether as observer or participant of that protest. Moreover, after a year of that protest, when I looked back on my experience and my subjective involvement, I can analyze my experience differently. I therefore can analyze the Bengali nationalist rhetoric more critically from my previous enthusiastic involvement of that protest.

Chapter Outline

In this thesis, first I introduced the theoretical frames those I used for analyzing my research in chapter one. The brief historical context of the contested identities is introduced in chapter two. Then I connected that historical context to examine the emergence of the idea of Bengali and Muslim women to relate it with the women of Shahhbag protest. In the fourth chapter I analyzed some selected online texts and images to show the sexist discourses in online sphere about the issue of war crime and Shahbah protest. Then finally I analyze the feminist alliance of Shahbag protest to examine it critically.

Second Chapter

Theoretical Frame and Concepts

Introduction

In this chapter I will introduce the theoretical and conceptual frame that I used in this research. For that, I will discuss the concepts of gender and nationalism as a framework to understand the sexist online discursive battle between Islamist and nationalists in Bangladesh. I will analyze how the discourses are embedded with the idea of women's body, appearance and her sexuality which uphold the masculine and sexist/(hetero)patriarchal nationalist idea. Then I will situate this Islam vs. women discourse in the global political discourse. Finally I will discuss about the discursive analysis of virtual sphere and how it is rooted on the power languages of gender and at the same time exaggerate it.

Gender and Nationalism

The concept of nationalism embedded in the construction of community identity and its others. Benedict Anderson explains the process of the construction though a goals of nation-building by imagining the community who supposed to have common past and present (Anderson 2006). Hobsbawm and Ranger explained this process as an invention of tradition of past and present (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012). This invention or imagination requires a process of inclusion and exclusion to make the national boundary which can be ethnocentric. As Nagel argues that "the project of establishing national identity and cultural boundaries tends to foster nationalist ethnocentrism" (Nagel 1998 p. 248). This ethnocentric attitudes often result to a sense of national superiority that is very much gendered (Joane Nagel 1998). Therefore in the process of the imagining the nation, the gender ideology remain embedded with it. The gendered nationalist imagination and practice upholds women as the signifier of national identity by controlling her body, sexuality and appearance. In this section I therefore discuss the symbolic role of women's body and sexuality and then show how it is connected with the masculine idea of nationalism.

Women as Symbols: Body, appearance, Sexuality:

One of the main focuses of the discursive battle between Islamists and nationalists in relation of Shahbag protest is women's body, appearance and sexuality. Through this women are considered as the symbol of identities. Their actual agency is therefore obscured by this symbolic presence. As Carol A. Smith shows, usually "women bear the burden of displaying the identifying symbols of their ethnic identity to the outside world, whether these be items of dress, aspects of language, or distinctive behavior" (Smith 1996 p. 51). Smith argues that, to uphold the national hierarchies that produce difference in identities, women are expected to play the role of the reproducers of its symbols. This expected role of women is rooted on the gender role of reproducing not only the members of the nation but also the national image itself. As Yuval-Davis argued, the expected role of women is basically to reproduce the boundary of ethnic/national groups and their differences and as the transmitters of the ideological collectivity of its culture (Yuval-Davis, Anthias, and Campling 1989). Therefore, the status of women as the reproducers actually conforming the gender hierarchy between production and reproduction, where men are the primary producers and actors of the nation/state and women are the suppliers of those actors thus considered secondary. Therefore, women's body and their appearance became the salient element than her actual agency as citizen or member of the nation. Elissa Helms (2008) argues on the basis of her ethnography on Bosnia-Herzegovina that, the gendered idea of national identity represented by the stereotyped images of women and their appearance. With the example of an image of Muslim/veiled women and western/liberated women dressed in a red bra and Santa hat, to call for a reconciliation between religious fundamentalists and liberals, Helms argues that, these images of women are producing the symbolic binary of Eastern/Islamic and Western/liberal identity (Helms 2008). Deniz Kandiyoti (2004) also argued that the representation of women as "symbolised yet another one of men's

achievements..... reduced to mere objects, women were, in these images, at the service of a political discourse conducted by men and for men.” (Kandiyoti 2004 p. 48). She argues that “women continue to serve as boundary markers between different national, ethnic, and religious collectivities, their emergence as full-fledged citizens will be jeopardized” (Kandiyoti 1991 p. 435).

Moreover Partha Chatterjee (1989) shows that in nineteenth century, the construction of ‘new Bengali’ women was an important signifier for Bengali nationalism to uphold both the Indian identity and western liberal/modern idea to be the boundary marker of Indian nationalism, which was different from British national identity. Chatterjee argues that, this identity of ‘new women’ constructed by a new patriarchy and combining the idea of decency and Victorian modernity with sharp distinction of *ghar/bahir* (public/private) (Chatterjee 1989). Moreover, the image of the Bengali women is strongly related with the image of motherhood (Bagchi 1990). Bagchi explains that the Bengali nationalist agenda in nineteenth and twentieth century invested on the idea of motherhood and glorifying the sacrificing mother image of Bengali which strengthen the hidden practice of oppression of women in family (Bagchi 1990). Mookherjee (2006) also explains the Bengali mother image, which is rooted in a negation of women’s sexuality. This is important to uphold the honor of the nation which is an indispensable part of the image of Bengali women (Mookherjee 2006). The control of sexuality of Bengali women executed by separating her from public and by limiting their role to wifely duties strictly. Chatterjee also showed that the ‘new Bengali women’ were expected to be separate from both the western women and lower class ‘common’ women who were said to be sexually promiscuous and vulgar (Chatterjee 1989).

Therefore, women are represented in nationalist rhetoric as signifiers of the nation. The women’s body is bearing the burden of the national/ethnic identity by their appearance. Women and her body,

appearance serves as the site of national symbol and honor (Kandiyoti 1991; Smith 1995; Joane Nagel 1998; Helms 2008). This sense of honor actually lies in the negation of sexual agency of women. Nagel (1998) showed that, “in nationalist rhetoric, the territory/woman logic is in effect denied agency of women, ‘she’ is only man’s possession” (Nagel 1998 p.249). The nationalist metaphor of nation-as-women suggest women’s body as battleground for national identity (Joane Nagel 1998). This whole process require the control of her body and sexuality that’s related with the idea of nation and national masculine citizenship of men. The gendered notion of nationalism requires women’s body as the symbol of nation and men are constructed as the real actors of the nation. In the Bengali nationalist rhetoric, too, women are considered as the symbol of nation and the honor of citizen men by upholding the mother image and by negating her sexual agency(Mookherjee 2006).

Sexuality, Masculine Honor and Nation

Women and her body is the indispensable part of the masculine nationalist idea where the sexual power relation lies. To explore the relation between masculinity and nationalism, Joan Nagel (1989) examines the concepts of ‘nationalism’ and ‘masculinity’ and explains the relations between. She argues that nationalist politics is masculine in both institutionally and culturally (Nagel 1998). The idea of a national family consists of feminine shame and masculine honor (McClintock 1993). Therefore the feminist critiques of nationalism explains that, women are seen as the ‘mothers’ of nation where she upholds the responsibility of shame by controlling her sexuality. Female sexuality is important for nationalism because it signifies women’s sexuality only as reproducers and under the control of men (Joane Nagel 1998). Therefore, controlling women’s sexuality is not only to deny women’s action and perception as agency but also it become the signifier of the honor of men,

since her body is considered under the possession of men and women's sexuality is made to reflect the honor of men and the family (Das 1996).

The nationalist idea of 'women's-body-as-men's-possession' creates rape as an effective weapon of war (Peterson 1999). Peterson (1999) showed that, "nature-as-female transmutes easily to nation-as- woman, where the Motherland is a woman's body and as such is ever in danger of violation – by 'foreign' males/sperm" (Peterson 1999 p.41). Peterson shows, this "patriarchal metaphor is a tacit agreement that men who cannot defend their woman/nation against rape, have lost their 'claim' to that body, that land" (Peterson 1999 p.41). This is the failure of men to protect her women/nation thus an effective weapon to dishonor him. While Susan Brownmiller (1975) examined rape in the Bangladeshi Liberation War, she argued rape was more effective than anything to create horror and terrorize the Bengali about the strength of Pakistani soldiers. She explained that rape is the "the victorious conquest over' women's being and "ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood" (Brownmiller 1993 p.14) This weapon thus became very effective in war between nations since being raped equals to dishonoring women's body and nation. In case of Bangladesh, this weapon became successful by the nationalist rhetoric of Bangladesh as "we achieve our victory in exchange of the honor of sisters and mothers". As Bina D'Costa examines the nationalist rhetoric of Bangladeshi war rape victims and propose a critical departure from gendered nationalist narrative of Liberation war of Bangladesh (D'Costa 2011) which inspired this research for a rigorous analysis of gendered Bengali nationalism in context of Shahbag protest.

Nationalism, Secularism, Islam and Feminism

To understand the discursive battle between secular Bengali nationalists and Islamists in Bangladesh, the secular vs. Islamist binary needs to be analyzed in the global political context. Elissa Helms (2008) shows with the example of the Muslim dominated area of Bosnia-Herzegovina that the secular call was presented by a gendered image of Eastern and Western women's embrace that, this gendered presentation of Muslim/Eastern vs. Western identity are actually the reconfigurations of east/west, Islam/ Europe, tradition/modernity. It is reaffirmed by such dichotomous representations which actually mask a much greater complexity of global, regional, and local dynamics which is at play (Helms 2008). To understand the secular-Islamist binary, French theorist Jean-Luc Nancy's (2008) argument is vital. He explains that the western idea of secularism emerged with Christianity therefore it is a modern concept linked with the Christian way of thought and experience (Nancy et al. 2008). Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood also explain the liberal politics behind the idea of secularism where Islam vs. secular emerged in a certain Western historical and political interest (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2006).

The orientalist perspective of oppressed 'Muslim women' in opposition to Western liberated secular white women is deeply rooted in the history of colonialism and in the emergence of the idea of modern secularism. As Marnia Lazreg (1995) shows, the idea of Algerian women as 'Muslim' and oppressed was represented not only in the colonial texts but also in the Western/American feminist thought (Lazreg 1994). She argues, feminism and Islam or ethnic identity of the Middle East was represented as the binary opposite to each other (Lazreg 1995). She examines the colonial dominant narrative to deconstruct this superiority of Western feminism. Moreover, Abu-Lughod (2002) also problematizes the orientalist image of 'oppressed Muslim women' in the post 9/11 context, where the oppositional idea of liberal vs. conservative/fundamentalist/terrorist Islam justified the need to save Muslim women by

liberal/western feminists by supporting ‘war on terror’. She therefore, deconstructs the liberal thought of saving Muslim women from her ‘veil’ to justify the American invasion of Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2002). Moreover, Joan Scott’s analysis (2009) on the headscarf banning debate in France explored that, the idea to facilitate the sexual equality of young Muslim women by regulating them by the French conventional gender relations actually as patriarchal as the Islamist idea of ‘veil’. “The French idea insisting that women be fully visible to men and the Islamists are insisting that women wear modest dress before men who are not their kin. Both ideas are gendered and derived from the sexual politics where women and her body is the symbol of something else than her personhood” (Scott 2009 p. 41). However, in a similar way, the feminist who are in alliance with Bengali nationalists are not addressing the inherent sexual politics that depict women as the symbol of nation. Therefore with Scott’s analysis it can be said that, while identifying the Islamist misogynist preaching about the ‘veil’, the feminist are not criticizing the sexist and patriarchal discourse of nationalism.

Most of the feminist organizations of Bangladesh taken for granted that, to question the Islamist misogynist propaganda, Bengali secular nationalism is the answer. For example, Nayla Kabeer argued, Islam and Bengali identities are basically controversial in Bangladesh and thus secularist policy is the one which benefits women (Kabeer 1991). Kabeer also upholds the dominant narrative of Islam vs. Bengali identity, women’s progress and didn’t question the gendering of Bengali nationalist ideology. The NGO influenced feminist organizations are therefore upholding the urge of saving oppressed Muslim women with the civil rights based agenda that coincide with the liberal orientalist discourse that criticized by Mahmud.

In that context, it is very crucial for a critical feminist scholarship to deal with on the one hand the

misogynist propaganda against women by the Islamist emergent fundamentalist and on the other hand the orientalist and imperialist right based civil liberty discourse of Bengali nationalists. As Jasmine Jain argues (2013), to deal with the situation, the Muslim feminists have to engage critically with the dual oppression of Islamophobic Orientalist tropes and Islamist religious extremist who limits her human rights and liberty (Hunt and Rygiel 2013). I therefore argue that, it is needed for a critical feminist analysis to focus on sexual politics of nationalism and Orientalist global discourse while making an ally with Bengalis nationalists to oppose the Islamist fundamentalist misogyny.

Gendered online discourses

To analyze discourse in virtual sphere as a part of the political debate in Bangladesh, the Foucauldian notions of ‘power’ and ‘discourse’ are very important to see how in a certain context of Bangladesh, a certain formation of discourses occurs. For Foucault, discourse is not only a matter of language, since through discursive practices knowledge is produced and that knowledge is always a form of power (Hall 1997). For Foucault, ‘There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations’ (Foucault, 1977 p.27). As Tonkiss explains, discursive analysis is very useful to understand the social reality because language constructs peoples’ relation to their social worlds (Tonkiss 2004). Therefore, discursive practices in a specific institutional setting regulate language through knowledge of a certain topic. The knowledge of ‘war rape’ , ‘Liberation war of Bangladesh’, ‘Jammat’ or ‘Shahbag protest’ thus assumes particular associations with these things, that the audience is assumed to have specific knowledge of the background. This way a certain discursive formation and linguistic style created in cyberspace.

Therefore, for this discursive analysis it is needed to situate language/knowledge/power in that institutional context of emergence of the contest between Bengali nationalism and fundamental Islamism from where Shahbag protest emerged.

Moreover, to analyze the discourse in cyberspace, one needs to consider the different expression, rules and opportunity that it provides comparing to other media or public sphere. To understand the expression in online sphere and the relation of linguistic expression to identity is very crucial, as the identity of the users can be is more fluid by multiple Ids and nick, than the offline presence. Online sphere can create multiple identities with multiple social meanings, therefore it is sometimes considered as a place of enormous possibilities to promote true democracy (Papacharissi 2002). However, Papacharissi explains that this is a mere utopian optimism in the contemporary unequal and global capitalist political context, where inequality in access and fragmented participation actually adapt the political discourse and power relations rooted in social meaning (Papacharissi 2002). Therefore, there is no such binary or difference between real and virtual experience. Nakamura shows that multiple selves that seem fluid in the virtual sphere are actually firmly gendered, raced and classed (Nakamura 2002). However, there are differences in the extent of expression, where one can get the opportunity to engage online by hiding his or her identity which can both disrupt and reinforce real world dominant values (Todd 2014). Therefore the multiple identities and their power relations rooted in social reality are crucial to analyzing discourses in online the sphere.

On the one hand, the online languages rooted on offline experience, and on the other hand, it opens the opportunity to exaggerate the gendered power relations through language. To understand the

embedded relationships between online and offline experience McGerty (2000) explained that both of them are materially the same (McGerty 2000). Moreover, to understand gendered norms and discourses in the online sphere, Melanie Stewart Millar argues that, the access of online and digital technology mostly limited to those people who represents the stereotypical meanings and practices of white, Western masculinity. She defined this representation as the "hypermacho man." (Millar 1998 p. 92). Although her analysis focused on western society, it raised the question to the access and control of the new technology. Since, the controller of this technology determines the social code of conducts and producing the discourse of the online sphere. Moreover the opportunity to hide the identity exaggerated the power language. Therefore, the online users and access of technology is one of the central deciding factors in the formation of the masculine discourse in the context of Bangladesh. Since its access and opportunity to use it are mostly open for male and middle class urban people, the online discourse reflects their discourse to a greater extent.

Conclusion:

In this chapter I discussed the theoretical analysis to explore the interrelation between gender and nationalism and the masculine discourses and situate this in the global political discourse. To analyze the online discourses, the key theoretical frames those I used to connect each other for explaining the case of online battle between Shahbag protest and feminist alliance, are, nationalism, masculinity, women's body and sexuality in national rhetoric. Women's body, appearance and sexuality used as the symbol of the masculine and sexist nationalist idea. Moreover, the 'Islam vs. women' discourse in the global political context is connected with the 'Islam vs. progress' discourse which is a determinant factor of constructing the oppositional idea of Bengali linguistic identity and Muslim religious identity. I also analyzed the discourse of virtual sphere to show how it is rooted on the power languages of gender and at the same time exaggerate it. In the next chapter

I will provide a historical and political mapping of the emergence of the contested identities that are embedded with the demand of war crime trial and Shahbag protest.

Historical Context of Bengali /Secular /Pro-Liberation War Vs. Bangladeshi/Islamist/Anti-Liberation War Identity

Introduction

From the British colonial period of the nineteenth century to the 1971 Liberation War and its consequences constructed the historical basis of Bengali-Muslim identity of Bangladesh. The emergence of Muslim and Bengali nationalisms were embedded with anti-colonial movement and anti-Pakistani conscience. Therefore the two dominant identities, one religious (Muslim) and another is cultural (Bengali), are embedded in a complex mixture (Bhadraaj 2011). The Bengali-Muslim identity was always a contested field over the priority between religion (Islam) and ethnicity/culture (Bengali) which is still now the major discursive debate in Bangladesh about the national identity (Karim 2004). The construction of this complex identity is rooted to its historical context. In this chapter, I will present this historical context of these contested identities through the political trajectory of Bengal. Moreover, I will elaborate on the emergence of online Bengali nationalism in parallel of the demand of war crime trial in the post Liberation era in Bangladesh in which the Shahbag protest 2013 is grounded.

From British Colony to Bangladeshi Liberation war:

British colonial rule ended up dividing the Indian subcontinent in two parts according to religion which caused partition in Bengal. Bengal was a vast area where people shared similar language and culture that was effectively divided. In 1947 when British rule ended, two nation-states were created following religious identity: India for Hindus, and Pakistan for Muslims. But Pakistan was the country which had two geographically separated parts, West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). West Bengal where Bengali Hindus are the majority, remained part of India and the remaining Bengal where the majority of Bengalis are Muslims became part of East Pakistan. The geographical, cultural, linguistic and economic gap and inequality between the two territories of Pakistan resulted in a movement of resistance in East-Pakistan to be freed from the dominance of West-Pakistan. Especially in 1948, when the state language of Pakistan was declared as Urdu³, the East Pakistani (Now Bangladesh) Bengalis became furious and resisted the decision. On 21 February, 1952 several university students organized a rally to protest the decision and some of them were killed by the police⁴. From this uprising of language movement the anti-Pakistani Ethno-linguistic political conscience emerged in East Pakistan. Therefore the resistant Bengali nationalist ideology was emphasized on language and culture which is somewhat similar to the West-Bengal over religion with the influence of secular idea. For what became known as the Liberation War of 1971, the dissociation from Pakistani Islamism was needed which resulted the emergence of secular Bengali nationalism. This new Bengali nationalism constructed a historically

³Urdu was the language of people of West Pakistan, where in all Pakistan, Bengali's are the majority and their mother language was Bengali.

⁴ Later in 17 November 1999, in memory of the Language martyrs, to promote multilingualism, this day was declared by UNESCO as the International Mother Language Day.

and culturally specific Bengali Muslim identity which is a complex mixture of language and religion. It emerged to distinguish itself linguistically and culturally different from Pakistan and religiously different from West Bengal. Those two differences are both politically important to keep the national identity separate from both India and Pakistan to justify the demand of a separate nation-state of Bangladesh in 1971.

In December 1970, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the leader of *Awami League* won the national elections to form a government and autonomy for East Pakistan. However, the former Chairman of the Pakistan People's Party, Bhutto, who were in power, refused to recognize the result of the election. On this context, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave a speech on March 7, 1971. He demanded transfer of power to *Awami League* before the assembly meeting on March 25, otherwise he urged the people of East Pakistan to turn all their homes into a fort of fight for liberation. It laid the people of East Pakistan to prepare for war. The students of Dhaka University, including women, took training and paraded in the road with dummy rifles. Discussion between leaders in assembly meeting failed and the war started by the military invasion by West Pakistan named "operation Searchlight" in 25th March 1971. This operation killed thousands of Bengali civilians, students and intellectuals who were demanding independence of Bangladesh. To resist the Pakistani army, the Bengali *Muktibahini* (Liberation army) was created and they engaged in guerrilla warfare with Pakistani military. From 26th March to 16th December, about 3,000,000 Bengalis were killed and about 20,000-40,000 women were raped by Pakistani army⁵. During the war Islamist political party *Jamait-I-Islami* wanted East Pakistan to remain with Pakistan. They prioritized the Muslim identity over culture and language. Therefore they were against the independence of Bangladesh and

⁵The official number of rape in 1971 is 20,000 according to government of Bangladesh. However, there are other statistics of individual researches where the numbers vary to 30,000 to 40,000.

supported the Pakistani army. On the other hand India supported Bangladesh from the beginning of the war by providing shelter for refugees and trains the guerrillas. The Indian army directly entered in that war on 3th December. On 14th December, the Pakistani military just before their surrender, precisely selected all the prominent intellectuals of East Pakistan and killed them as a part of the Pakistani conspiracy to make the Bangladesh as an intellectually incapable state and on 16th December, the Pakistani army surrendered thus Bangladesh won the Liberation to establish separate state. After independence, the war rape victims were officially declared as war-heroines by Bengali nationalist father figure Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who did it with the intention of protecting those women from stigma of rape and dishonor.

Emergence of Islamist Conscience

After independence of Bangladesh, most of the leaders of *Jamat-I-Islami* went to exile. Moreover, in 1975 after the murder of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP) was formed by one of the central leaders of *Muktibahini*, General Ziaur Rahman. With his support, Gulam Azom, the main leader of *Jamat-I-Islami*, came back to Bangladesh from exile. To oppose *Awami league*, the Islamist nationalist conscience emerged with BNP and *Jamat*. BNP prioritized on the difference of identity from India and Hindu Bengali's of West Bengal and to include the non-Bengali communities in Bangladesh by claiming the 'Bangladeshi' identity as the national identity. However, this effort was directed towards an anti-Bengali nationalist identity by the new Muslim cultural elites backed by Saudi Arabia which is different from folk-Muslim tradition of local Bengal (Karim 2004). President General Ziaur Rahman's patronage to regain the political strength of *Jamat-I-Islami*, and the next military dictator Ershad's declaration of Islam as the state religion strengthened the Islamic intervention in the political realm. The proclaimed war criminals *Jamat-I-Islami* leaders were slowly made their acceptance in political scenario by the dynamic

combination with other political parties and election coalitions and by religious hegemony of the majority Muslims. At the same time, the International financial support of *Jamat-I-Islami* created new religious elite in parallel with Bengali intellectual and cultural elite groups (Karim 2004).

In the 15 years of military rules from 1975 to 1990 (first by General Ziaur Rahman and then by General Hussain Muhammad Ershad) the *Jamat-I-Islami* slowly became stronger in political sphere and militant Islamist ideologies emerged (Karim 2004). In 1990, after a civil unrest the military rules ended and by the following election the center-right BNP won a plurality of seats in parliament and formed a government under the leadership of Khaleda Zia, the widow of General Ziaur Rahman with support of *Jamaat-I-Islami*. The *Jamat-I-Islami* became stronger by the second administration of BNP with the four parties coalition after 2001 election where *Jamat-I-Islami* was one of the major parties among them. Therefore the *Jamat-I-Islami* leaders became influential part of the government. This time few *Jamat-I-Islami* leaders who were also accused to war crimes became MP's and ministers.

Emergence of the Demand of the punishment of war criminals

After independence, in 1973, although the Bangladeshi Government passed the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act (Kay QC 2010), president Shiekh Mujibur Rahman declared a general pardon to those *Jamat-I-Islami* leaders for collaborating the Pakistani army thus the bill was actually remain ineffective to accuse them legally for war crime. Those leaders were accused to help the genocide and rape by Pakistani soldiers by helping them to find the guerilla's to kill and abduction of Bengali women to the military camps for rape. They were called as *Razakar* (collaborator of enemy) by Bengali pro-liberation peoples. They were also accused to be involved directly in mass killing and rape in the Liberation War.

Those *Jamat-I-Islami* leaders were also accused to directly involve in selecting the intellectuals and helping the killing. Therefore, the demand for the trial and the punishment of these accused war criminals was raised slowly after independence. In 1972, the spouses of martyred intellectuals started the demand by public protest.

To protest the re-establishment of these proclaimed war criminals of *Jamat-I-Islami* leaders after 1975, the demand of war crime trial emerged more strongly. Jahanara Imam, a *Shaheed Janani* (Mother of a martyr) and political activist formed a group of activist with some prominent left-liberal intellectuals of the country named *Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee* (Committee for abolition of killers and collaborators). They conducted a mock trial named *Gonoadalot* (people's tribunal) in 1992 for accused war criminals. This mock trial gave the death sentenced for the accused war criminals. The demand thus became an important issue in political discourse raised by the left-wing and Bengali nationalist civil society in Bangladesh. For the trial Jahanara Imam and other prominent members of *Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee* were charged with treason of the country by the government of Bangladesh. After the death of Jahanara Imam in 1996 this case was dismissed and prominent Bengali nationalist intellectual Shahriar Kabir became the acting president and the chief executive of that committee. From that time, the demand for the punishment of war crime trials took a strong secular position in opposition of *Jamat-I-Islami*, and 'Islam vs. Liberation war' discourse became stronger in public discourse.

Therefore, the sharp division between the identity of Bengali and Muslim constructed by these processes became the representative identity contest of religion vs. culture, 'pro-liberation' vs. 'anti-Liberation', Bengali vs. Bangladeshi and Islam vs. Liberation War.

Emergence of Online Bengali Nationalism

On the other hand, from 2005, in parallel with the two dominant cultural groups, representative of Muslim and Bengali identity, the contested discourse about national and demand of the punishment of war criminals influenced heavily in online discourse. The inception of interactive and participatory Bangla blogging (blogs whose medium is Bengali) has created a discursive virtual community of privileged groups, mostly of educated, urban, male internet users. Within this group, the sharp distinction emerged with the ideological debate of the Bengali Nationalist/pro-Liberation vs. *Jamat*/Islamists/anti-Liberation since it was the most prominent discourse of this blogosphere (Chowdhury 2011). From 2005 the technology for writing Bengali in online was invented, and from then the blogging culture in Bengali language became popular. From the beginning of Bangla blog, it emerged with much more community interaction which is different from individual blogging (M. Z. Chowdhury 2014). Therefore this interacting community blogosphere was powerful enough to generate nationalist vs. Islamist emotions and antagonism to each other even in the public discourse (M. Z. Chowdhury 2014). However, in online Bangla blogging culture, the opportunity to create multiple fake ID's, generates aggressive attitudes in online interaction with sexist slang words. When some Islamist bloggers were trying to establish the *Jamati* politics in the logic of Islam, A group of the predecessor bloggers named themselves 'A-team' and declared themselves as 'Pro-Liberation War' bloggers and organized to harass the 'Anti-Liberation' bloggers' propaganda. Basically at that time, this 'A-team' was organized to harass the Islamist bloggers who supported the *Jamati* politics under the guise of protecting religion.

War crime Tribunal and Shahbag Protest 2013

In this context, *Awami League* won a landslide victory in election in 2008 for its electoral promise to hold war crime tribunals for the accused Islamist leaders in the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, the

daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to form the government with more than two thirds of the majority. Following the main election promise, the government set up the ITC (War Crimes Tribunals) in 2009 with the assistance of UNDP. The War Crimes Fact Finding Committee submitted their report by accusing 1600 suspects prior to the formation of ITC (War Crimes Tribunals) (Bergman 2014). And the parliament updated the 1973 war crime act (Bergman 2014). By 2012, the cases of nine leaders of *Jamat-I-Islami* and two leaders of BNP started. Three leaders of *Jamat-I-Islami* were convicted of several charges of war crimes. Abul Kalam Azad (named as Bachchu Razakar) was sentenced to death in January 2013 in absentia of him (Bergman 2014). *Jamaat-e-Islami* supporters and their student wing, *Islami Chhatra Shibir*, protested this verdict and called a general strike nationwide in demanding to stop the tribunal and release the leaders which fostered violence. They have demanded the tribunal be scrapped permanently and their leaders be released immediately (“Jamaat-Shibir Men Run Amok” 2014 NP).

As I mentioned earlier, after Abdul Quader Molla (known as butcher Molla), assistant secretary general of *Jamat*, was convicted in 5th February 2013 and sentenced to life imprisonment, the online Bengali nationalist activists called a demonstration in Shahbag Which resulted the major historical event as Shahbag protest 2013. This protest “became the representative of a new kind of spontaneous movement expressing its distaste for the country’s corrupt political culture” (“The Paradoxes of Bangladesh’s Shahbag Protests | India at LSE” 2014 NP). Although the central demand of the Shahbag protest was the capital punishment for the war criminals, they included banning of *Jamat-I-Islami* and they take oath to boycott all the *Jamat* directed institutions. The protest consisted heterogeneous groups with many layers of plurality and political dynamics, even many of the participants were not firm in the demand of capital punishment (“Rahnuma Ahmed:

Reclaiming Ekattur: Fashi, Bangali | ALAL O DULAL” 2014), but they were for sure advocating for the assurance of a fair trial to punish the war criminals to heal the old national wound. Shahbag square was raised with a new kind of mass protest with plurality and anarchic character, often compared with occupy movements and Arab spring that creates enthusiasm within the activists (“শাহবাগের স্বাধীনতা: শাহবাগের অরাজনীতি | মতামত-বিশ্লেষণ” 2014). The protest were spirited by the continuous slogans for which it was said by the protesters that, “Shahbag never sleeps”. The slogans were “*Joy Bangla*” (Victory for Bengal), “*Tumi ke ami ke, Bangali Bangali*” (who are you, who am I, Bengali Bengali) “*Ka te Quader Mollah, tui razakar tui razakar*” (Ka for Quader Molla, you are the collaborator), “*Amamder sorire shohider rokto*” (The blood of the Martyrs are in our body). Later these slogans become slightly inclusive by including the other indigenous identities and Birangana’s/war heroines by the persuasion of feminist and activists, for example: “*Tumi ke ami ke, Garo, Chakma, Bangali*” (who are you, who am I, Garo, Chakma, Bangali) and “*Amader sorire Biranganar rokto*” (The blood of the war heroines in our body) (Muktasree 2014). Although the protest consisted heterogeneous groups with many layers of plurality and political dynamics, the protest quickly connected with the Bengali nationalist emotion in opposition of accused war criminals who are the leaders of *Jamat-I-Islami*. Since the call for Shahbag was initiated by the online Bengali nationalist activist, they were became the organizing body and sometimes represented as the ‘hero’ of the nation by mainstream media. Therefore ‘bloggers’ became the celebrities to the Bengali nationalist civil society and ‘villain’ to the Islamists. (“Bloggers, Atheism and Shahbag Movement” 2014). With their leadership, an organizing body was established as the central deciding body of Shahbag protest and it is named as “*Gonojagoron Moncho*” (Stage of Mass Awareness), was created to control this protest.

However, the heterogeneous participation of Shahbag protest soon becomes controlled by some key figures and connected with the secular Bengali nationalists. Blogger Imran. H. Sarkar, who was the convener of the online call for Shahbag protest became the main spokesman of this protest. With some of the online activists the prominent liberal civil society members who were with the movement leaded by Jahanara Imam and *Ghatok Dala Nirmul Committee* and leading figures of secular Bengali nationalism were also became the key figures in decision making. However, with the political prominence of secular nationalist rhetoric, there were a few voices raised within the participants of the Shahbag protests who tried to be critical of this polarization between Islam and Liberation War. As Faruk Wasif as an active participant and supporter of Shabag protest, problematized the ‘ultra secular’ nationalist attitudes to analyze the constructed political trope of ‘Atheist-believer’ polarization which becomes also a twofold danger for women of the country (“Shahbagh: Islam vs. Liberation War Fyasad: Where Do We Stand, Where Do We Want to Go. | ALAL O DULAL” 2014). However, this critical position was attacked very aggressively by those online nationalists⁶. Therefore whoever among the supporters of Shahbag protest wanted to be critical of this polarization discourse or the gendered notion of nationalists became tagged by the nationalists as ‘Sushil chagu’ (Civil goat as Jamat/Shibir referred as goat by nationalists) and attacked aggressively in online. Therefore, ahead of the multiple voices, like feminist, indigenous rights activists, the extreme Bengali nationalist voice became the only prominent and representative voice of Shahbag protest.

The huge participation of women makes that protest of Shahbagh square unique. This ‘female factor’ became one of the central themes for discussion because of their massive and active

⁶ <http://www.sachalayatan.com/himu/47847> Last accessed 11th June 11, 2014

participation(“The Female Factor: Bangladesh Protests Break Boundaries” 2014). The young women took the lead on the square for chanting slogans. Some female students became the leading voices of slogans and they gained the huge popularity through the media coverage. These women were called *Agni konna* (Firebrand daughter). The visible participation of female students was significantly progressive given that sexual harassment in public places is quite common in Bangladesh(“Shahbagh: For Fiery Sisters” 2014). Moreover, most of the women were progressive and activist, they didn’t usually wear the *burkha* or cover their heads with a scarf or *orna* (a piece of cloth to cover the chest like scarf) and many of them wear jeans with *kamij/fotua/Pangabi* (long tops) and *orna* without covering head. The dress and resistant appearance of these women became one of the central issues of debate surrounding the protest. Moreover, since the protest was continuous, the protesters stayed in Shahbaag square also at night, something that also become an issue of concern.

However, although the resistant female appearance was one of the most progressive characteristics of this protest, the female participation in this protest was neither consistent with the appearance of majority of women in Bangladeshi society, nor did they play any part in decision making in *Gonojagoron Moncho*. While the protest was going on, the protestors established a tent in Shahbag Square with several computers and named it as ‘cyber war’ where they were attacking *Jamati* and Islamist online Propaganda against Shahbag protest. Both in Shahbag square and in the online part of the battle, women were present only in ‘appearance’, not in controlling the protest by playing any role in decision making. Women’s participation was limited only as auxiliary of the Shabag Protest and used as weapon in the discursive battle. Young women’s resistant existence in public demonstration, staying in night in the street with their comrades and smoking in public became central heated issues of criticism by the Islamist discourses. The pictures of the resistant women

were became the subject to virtual manipulations by *Jamati* discourse. On the contrary, in defense of this, the Bengali nationalists attacked them with aggressive and sexist words by manipulating the story and spread the sex-scandals of the female student groups of *Jamat* named *Islami chatri shongho* besides upholding the pro-liberation war consciences.

Emergence of Hefajot-I-Islam to oppose the Shahbag protest:

In protest of the demand for capital punishment of war criminals by Shahbag protesters, one organization named *Hefajot-I-Islam*, demonstrated in a huge gathering of *mullahs* (Teachers of Islamic education schools) from all over Bangladesh in the square in Dhaka's central commercial area *Motijhil* on 5th May 2013. Although they claimed that they are not a political party, but they were backed by *Jamat-I-Islami* and playing a big role in political scenario. This organization was founded by the teachers of Islamist education system Madrasa in 2010 to protest secular education. They also demonstrated in a violent rally to protest the equal right of women in inheritance in 2011. On 5th May 2013, they put forth a 13 point charter, where they demanded the banning of women's participation in public place and that legal action be taken against the anti-religious and so-called atheist bloggers of Shahbag protest ("Secularism | Analysis of Law, Politics and Governance in Bangladesh" 2014). They explained their demand in a statement where they compared women with *tetul* (a delicious sour fruit which can makes saliva in the mouth), which will seduce men for sin. Comparing women as *tetul* as a object of provocation, hugely criticized and became the talk of the town and the central topic of satire by progressive groups of the country. Consequently the feminist organizations, mostly NGOs along with *Gonojagoron moncho* held a women's rally on 20th June 2013 to protest these fundamentalist and misogynist demands.

Conclusion

The national identity is a matter of contested discourse in Bangladesh. The priority contest between religion and ethno-linguistic identity became the indispensable part of the two party political battle of Bangladesh, where *Awami League* is upholding the Bengali nationalism and BNP is upholding the Bangladeshi Nationalism in coalition with *Jamat-I-Islami*. Therefore Bengali nationalism became associated with *Awami League* and liberal-left wing secular nationalism that emphasize on ethno-linguistic identity in opposition to the Muslim identity being promoted by *Jamat-I-Islami* and the Bangladeshi right-wing nationalist party BNP. Since the proclaimed war criminals are the leaders of Islamist party *Jamat-I-Islami*, backed by BNP, the demand of the punishment war criminals became the most sensitive and burgeoning political issue in the current political scenario of Bangladesh. The discursive battle went from a live political demonstration to the cyber space, the oppositions of *Hefajot* vs. *Shahbag*, Islamist vs. Bengali became the central issue of debate where women with her appearance and image became the most sensational part. In the next chapter I will relate this identity contest with the idea of Bengali Muslim women to analyze the image of ‘women’ in *Shahbag*.

The Idea of Bengali and/or Muslim Women and 'Women' of Shahbag

Introduction

In this chapter I will analyze the Bengali-Muslim woman's image for connecting this with Shahbag protest and its gendered war between Bengali nationalist and Islamist discourses. I will contextualize this on the construction of Muslim and Bengali women as opposite to each other as the signifier of progressive vs. backward women in Bengal and Bangladesh to relate the participation of women on Shahbag protest and its representations and challenges. For that, I will analyze the political historical trajectory of this construction in connection of stereotypical progressive vs. backward idea of femininity referred to Bengali vs. Muslim women consequently. In this historical construction, I will discuss that the idea of Bengali women articulated with the idea of secularism, spiritual superiority, purity, aesthetic, decency and motherly emotion. On the other hand the image of Muslim women was constructed as backward, uncivilized, fundamentalist and oppressed. Then, I will analyze the underlined similarity of the idea of femininity in both of these two apparently different ideas of womanhood. However, the idea of Bengali Muslim women of Bangladesh, emerged in a process of combining these two apparently opposite idea of womanhood. It is a combination of these apparently two opposite types, a mixture of liberated, educated, decent and modern women, whose head and chest are well covered with her sari, but not completely cover the face like veil. She is educated, practicing Muslim, but liberal as well. When women's role considered as the marker of community, they don't get the full status of its member as men, rather considered only the bearer of the symbol or reproducers of the member (Yuval-

Davis, Anthias, and Campling 1989, Smith 1995, Kandioty 2004). Women is represented in Shahbag protest as the symbol of failure or achievement of Bengali nationalist or Islamist men that prioritized their appearance rather than their actual role as subject/actor. My argument is, apparently the opposite ideas of womanhood which became one of the issue of heated debate in Shahbag protest, are rooted in the stereotyped idea of femininity. Therefore, both of these two ideas are constructed from the idea of femininity as secondary and auxiliary of men's subjectivity.

The emergence of Bengali women

The discourses of ideal 'Bengali woman' are the historical product of Bengali nationalism in nineteenth century. This Bengali nationalism was emerged as a by-product of colonial literary aim which creates a new class of *Vodrolok* (Gentleman)⁷. The women of these class also refers to *vodromohila* (Ladies) emerged as a complex identity part of the Bengali nationalist responses of British colonial project by combining the European and Indian idea of femininity, to deal with the colonial criticism of customary oppression of women. As Chatterjee argues, this image of 'new women' in responses to British colonial condemnation to Indian customary tradition, was created by Bengali nationalist project as a form of reformed tradition, where she is "superior from Western women, traditional Indian women and low-class women" (Chatterjee 1989 p. 622). This identity of 'new women' constructed by a new patriarchy and combining the idea of decency and Victorian modernity with sharp distinction of *ghar/bahir* (Public/Private) (Chatterjee 1989). It is also rooted in the spiritual and material separation where Bengali men (Vadrolok) are the upholder of material world, and Bengali women are the representative of spiritual India. Therefore, women

⁷ Within this class it was also called a 'Bengal renaissance' (Sangari and Vaid 1990) which created a significant demarcation between pre-colonial traditions. This new class was much more embedded with Hindu religion of Bengal.

(*Vadromohila*) are not separate from religious purity and superior spiritual image of India/nationhood. Although the liberal secular education was devoted for men, the women's curriculum didn't give up religious bound to uphold wifely virtue where husband is positioned as God. However, the spiritual virtue of India was limited only to Hinduism, therefore Bengali secular new nationalist were more connected with the idea of Hindu nationalism, especially about home, family and marriage (Sarkar 2008).

Moreover, The image of the Bengali women is strongly related with images of motherhood (Bagchi 1990). Bagchi explains that the Bengali nationalist agenda in nineteenth and twentieth century invested on the idea of motherhood and glorifying the sacrificing mother image of Bengali which strengthen the hidden practice of oppression of women in family.

Idea of Muslim Women

One the other hand, the Indian and Bengali Muslim women in the late nineteenth century were marginalized as backward. Bengali nationalist project were considered them always 'other' and not proper Indian (Sarkar 2008). Sarkar on her book analyzed the discourses about Muslim women in history to deconstruct this 'otherness'. Sarkar explained that the Hindu customs and ideology were associated with the Indian nationalism with liberal western idea which resulted this exclusion. Sarkar explained that the discursive and material contexts that have historically produced the Muslim women as victimize, invisible and/or mute. She connected this discourse with liberal feminism's emphasis on certain kind of action as emancipatory for women. She also analyzes the writing of Begum Rokeya Shakhaya Hossen, who considered to be one of the most radical feminist voice within Bengali Muslim society on early twentieth century and who were critical about not only the Islamist imposition of veil but also about the colonialism. Sarkar shows that, in Rokeya's understanding, seclusion of women by Islamist practice of veil "was a symptom of women's

subordination, not necessarily a cause”. She continues about Rokeya’s arguments: “therefore, simply abolishing the practice without making access to adequate education and the opportunity to work for a living available to women might help men in their quest for a “liberal/modern” self-image and adequately “modern” companions, but it would achieve precious little in terms of helping women gain economic and psychological independence, or self-respect”(Sarkar 2010 p.17). Therefore, Rokeya’s criticism was directed towards a “certain normative vision of femininity – docile, inactive and ultimately serving to strengthen male dominance both at home and in the world – that was underwritten by middle/upper class privilege” (Sarkar 2010 p. 15). Her writings were different in comparing to the idea of new Bengali women created by Bengali nationalist in response of British nationalism that upholds conventional idea of femininity with westernized education. However, Rokeya’s feminist understanding was shadowed by the dominant narrative of her interpreters, and she started to refer as only an ‘education reformer’ for women. The rebellious elements of her thought was meticulously excluded from that narrative about her (Ahmed 2014). Therefore, the Bengali nationalist narrative was powerful and it successfully excluded Muslim women as a homogenous category of oppressed and backward.

Bengali and/or Muslim women

Although in Bangladesh, majority of people is Muslim, but the complex history to form a secular Bengali nationalist identity for independence from Pakistan in 1971 was closely linked with Hindu heritage of ‘Bengal renaissance’ (Bose 2014) to uphold the cultural symbols of Bengaliness prior to religious symbol. After the British colonial rule, in Pakistani regime, the emergence of Bengaliness was required elements for political identity and independence for Bengali’s to justify the need of autonomy and resist the cultural and economic domination of West Pakistan over East

Pakistan. To resist the Islamist fundamentalism of Pakistan and to uphold the difference from them, the nineteenth century's elite Bengali identity has to be reproduced. Women's appearance and code of conduct became the marker to serve that purpose. Although different from its root because of the mixture of folk Muslim tradition of Bengal (Karim 2004), this new contemporary Bangladeshi Bengali identity was to remain the bearer of the idea of nineteenth century's Bengali 'new women', influenced by Shantiniketon tradition constructed by Rabindranath Tagore who was a literary authority of Bengali literature and music, won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 as a first non-European⁸. Therefore, this historical process constructs a specific image of decent, sober and sacrificing 'Bengali woman' (Banerjee 1990). The right to sing and uphold the cultural signifier of *Rabindra Sangit* (Songs of Rabindranatha Tagore) and wearing *bindi*⁹ became the symbol of resistance to Pakistani identity and to uphold Bengali identity which was treated as the symbol of Hinduism and India to Pakistanis (Karim 2004). Nayla Kabeer highlighted the same inspiration of Bengali identity in her work showing that these cultural markers were significant to uphold for those Bengali Muslim women to emphasize Bengali nationalism. She argued that Islam and Bengali identities are basically controversial to each other, thus they can't be together. Therefore, she argues, *Awami League's* secularism policy benefits women (Kabeer 1991). She therefore upholds the dominant narrative of Islam vs. Bengali identity/women's liberation/progress and didn't question the gendered notion of Bengali nationalist ideology.

⁸ Shantiniketan is a small town where Rabindranath Tagore built a University named Visva-Bharati University by the money that he received from Nobel Prize in 1913. It's become a legendary referential representative institution of Bengali culture.

⁹ Colorful mark in the forehead in between the eyebrows of women which is a religious symbol of Hindu married women, but widely used as an element of beautification of Bengali women. However, because of the Hindu religious tag, and prohibition of any mark in the forehead of Muslim, it became a signifier of Hindu/Secular/Non-Muslim symbol.

However, on the other hand, the linguistic/cultural emphasis to create Bengali nationalism lost its necessity and appeal in political sphere slowly after the liberation. The linguist/cultural nationalism of Bangladesh raised by the plea to free Bangladesh from Pakistan was a class specific phenomenon, the cultural nationalist elite were disassociated from the mass people of the country (Karim 2004). Karim shows that, many Muslim Bangladeshi had a ‘suspicion’ of India’s role on the liberation war and they are careful enough to keep the difference from Indian Hindutha movement (Karim 2004). Therefore, the secondary status of religious identity in 70’s later changed through the emergence of importance of Islam in political sphere in Bangladesh to keep that separation from India and Hinduism, especially after the murder of Shikh Mujibur Rahman. From the 1980’s, ideology of Islam was spreaded by *Jamati* political influence and they create many women’s group to create social gathering regularly for spreading and strengthen Islamist knowledge, usually called ‘*jamat*’ (Kabir 2004). From then on, the proper appearance of Muslim women and ‘*porda*’ (*hijab*, or the veil) became an issue of debate. Changes in women’s dress code again became the marker of these contested identities. Therefore, although the most formal, common and traditional dress for Bengali women was the *sari*, it has been slowly been in contest and replaced by *salwar kamij* and *burkha* in the logic of proper Islamist wear. Even when most of the elder/married women were used to wear sari, they felt the pressure to wear it in a more Islamic way by covering the head and hands which became a symbol of sober Bengali Muslim women. The appearance of the leaders of the two main political parties of Bangladesh who are rotating as the prime minister for last 20 years are representational of this Bengali Muslim women image. Especially the image of Sheik Hasina, the leader of Awami league who is playing the role of the prime minister for third times, and whose party is the proclaimer of Bengali nationalist ideology, her appearance is representational of the idea of Bengali Muslim woman.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (left) and the Leader of the BNP Khaleda Zia (right)

Source: <http://binurahman.wordpress.com/political-leaders-photography/> Last accessed 11th June 2014

Idea of femininity through these identities

We can see the apparent contradiction and difference in ideas between religious based Muslim women's image and cultural/linguistic based secular Bengali image of women. However, these two different images are actually rooted in a shared idea of gendered womanhood as a signifier of national/religious identity and with the idea of motherhood. The idea of proper Muslim women is linked with the idea of 'veil', which is fundamentally representational of the men's control over women's sexuality. The Imams and women's group, influenced by Islamist tradition of Jamat-I-Islam who preaches those ideas in women's group and religious gathering, the idea of veil that they disseminate was all about to control women's sexuality in the name of Islamic lifestyle. As Joan Scott explains, the idea of veiling in Muslim juridical tradition was to prevent "ostentatiousness" the Arabic synonym for "*Tabbaruj*," which refers to a woman, "bearing of immodesty or conspicuous symbol" (Scott 2009 p.153). Saba Mahmood adds one more term which also referred

to explain the Islamist idea of veiling for women, which is “*fitna*” meaning both sexual temptations and the disruption of political order. Mahmood explains that concept further that, women are assumed as the sexual object of men thus inherently provocative, thus they should hide their seductive body to prevent such provocation (Mahmood 2006). Thus the logic of veil and to cover their body is rooted in this sexist assumption of women as sexual object for men. On the other hand, the mother image of Jahanara imam in Shahbag protest was also driven from this ideology. Her appearance in white sari, covered her hair and her image as leader has replaced by her mother image. Her agency and resistant personality blurred under the image of “*Shaheed Janani*” (Mother of martyrs). Therefore, the sexual passivity of women in Islamist idea of veiling and the patriarchal mother image of Bengali nationalism both rooted in the gendered notion.

Women in Shahbag movement and the contest over women’s image

The images and appearance of women again became cultural signifiers in the Shahbag Protest. The Protesting girls and their dress became the target of attack by the Islamist camp. Although it is not common and safe for Bangladeshi girls to wear western dress in public places, especially without *orna*, drinking alcohol is legally prohibited for all Bangladeshi citizens and sexually explicit behaviors (like kissing in public place) are not at all expected social behavior, the Jamati propaganda directed towards the manipulation of the female protesters of Shahbag, by manipulating their pictures and presenting them with western short dresses holding bottles of alcohol and kissing boys in public to destroy the credibility of the demands raised in Shahbag protest as a consequence s of the polarization between Bengali nationalists and Islamist where I will come back later.



A huge painting of the portrait of Jahanara Imam and the protesting collage students. Source: <http://binurahman.wordpress.com/political-leaders-photography/> Last accessed 11th June 2014.

On the other hand, in the high days of Shahbag Protest 2013, on 26th of March to celebrate the declaration of Liberation of Bangladesh with 14 *Biranganas* who appeared in white sari, organized by an NGO and *Gonojagoron Moncho*, and they demanded the identity of ‘Freedom Fighter’ in for giving up the identity of Birangana. However the striking part of their ‘appearance’ in Shahbag protest was that they were covered with white sari as a symbol of innocence/asexuality in demand of the status of freedom fighter. The appearance of the rape survivors in the demand of ‘freedom fighter’ status with white dress was an effort to asexualize their identity and give up the ‘war-heroine’ label as a means of reclaiming honor. It raised the question of sexuality although it was not discussed there. The appearance of those women in white saris had symbolic meanings as an attempt to identity transformation from violated/sexual to honored/ asexual/innocent women. In

Bengali culture, white is a color of innocence and peace. In Hindu tradition, which is dominant in Bengali cultural symbols, Hindu widows are bound to wear white sari as a symbol of the abandonment of their sexual life. White sari is the opposition of red, which is a symbol of their sexual life within marriage, where the color of a bridal sari is red. On the other hand, in Muslim culture, white is the color of death. So white become the symbol of innocence, asexuality and death in Bengali conscience. It should be also noted that, in Bengali culture, both men and women wear colorful knit cotton clothes. Therefore, appearing in a completely white sari, and fully covered with it was striking for the spectators with Bengali conscience. It became the signifier of innocence in opposition of sexual agency of the women and related to the asexual image of ‘mother and sister’. Some of the members of the organizers told me the reason of wearing white to uphold the symbol of innocence. Mookherjee (2006) showed that negating sexuality is important to uphold honor for mother image in Bengal (p.439). Moreover, Nagel also explained about the threatening image of female sexuality as “While female fecundity is valued in the mothers of the nation, unruly female sexuality threatens to discredit the nation” (Nagel 1998; 256). In *Shahbag gonojagoron Moncho*, those women appeared to resist the idea of ‘loss of innocence’ by negation of sexuality by covering them in white sari. However without questioning the relation of the sexist stigma, this demand is a process of negotiation with it by accepting the sexist logic of the stigma.

Moreover, a huge portrait of Jahanara Imam was placed in the middle of the Shahbag square. She became the icon of the demand of war crime trials and her identity of *Shahid Janani* was actually defined by her son who died for the nation’s freedom. The decent mother image of Bengali women is representational of her image, with white sari that covered her head.

Therefore, we can see that, the representation of women and their appearance served the gendered purpose for both the Islamists and Nationalist. As Yuval-Davis (1997) shows, women's role tend to assigned by nationalist projects focused on their reproductive identity rather than the production (Yuval-Davis 1997). They are not only considered the reproducers of biological reproducers of member of the society, but also the reproducers of the boundary of ethnic/national groups and signifier of national difference (Yuval-Davis 1997). Using their arguments, DeDeniz Kandiyoti (2004) problematized this nationalist agenda in post-colonial societies, where in opposition of 'veiled' backward women, nationalist agenda is portraying liberated nationalist women as unveiled, participating in public sphere. She argues, portraying women's emancipatory image by nationalist agenda is actually symbolized it as the men's achievements, reduced women to mere objects (Kandioty 2004). She argues that women playing the role of the "markers of their communities has had a deleterious effect on their emergence as full-fledged citizens of modern nation-states" (Kandioty 2000 p.57). Therefore, for both the Islamist and Bengali nationalists, images of women and their role served in relation with men and where they are considered as auxiliary rather than the main actors, only as the symbols of difference. Moreover, Elissa Helms (2008) argues with the example of Bosnia-Herzegovina that, the contest of national identity between urban secular 'Muslim-ness' and a combination of local/Sufi and Middle Eastern/Salafist extremist Muslim Identity. These identity contests are played out over the behavior and dress of women (Helms 2008). Her analysis upholds the same kind of contested national identity that is symbolized by women's dress codes and appearance, where the women actually using as a metaphor of nation rather than the actor of it.

Conclusion

The discourses of ideal Bengali and/or Muslim woman are the historical and contested sphere between secular-nationalist and religious identities. The emergence of ‘new Bengali women’ is rooted in colonial history of Indian subcontinent. This ‘new women’ were represented as progressive to fight back the colonial accusation of customary oppression of Indian women as a mixture of western liberal idea and Indian Hindu wifely virtue. However, this image was highly patriarchal and created by the gendered notion of Hindu women. On the other hand, Muslim women were excluded from this image as oppressive and backward and their resisting voices also erased from history. Through this historical trajectory, Bengali and Muslim women became a contested identity. Bengaliness upholds progressive, liberal, modern and pro-women-liberation images, where Muslim upholds backward and anti-women images. However, after Independence, the growing importance of religion makes a pressure to accommodate religious identity within liberal identity. The image of Bengali-Muslim women as one identity therefore became a contested zone and upholding these two identities at the same time became crucial. The female political leaders faced this challenge and they represented this modest Bengali Muslim woman, which became the image of a combination of religious modesty and national liberal identity.

In this context, Islamist attack towards Shahbag protest represented women of Shahbag with sexy clothing, drinking alcohol and smoking to prove their immorality and anti-Islamic practice, they were successful enough to depict them as ‘whore’ with their words as well. These imagery manipulations were very successful to make a negative impression of the protesting girls of Shahbag protest to the mass people of the country because it directly challenged the Bengali-Muslim decent women image. This manipulation and its ‘success’ indicates the patriarchal idea of veiling according Islamist logic to control women’s sexuality. On the other hand, to regain the

lost honor of raped women in war, the symbolic denial of sexuality in contrast of innocence by wearing white sari by the raped victims in Shahbag shows the inherent gendered logic of nationalism where women and her body is considered the symbol of nation whose *ijjot* (honor) can be violated by enemy penetration. Moreover, the mother image of Jahanara Imam as ‘mother of martyr’ overshadowed her active agency under the celebration of motherhood. Therefore, although to protest the sexist idea of Islamist womanhood, Bengali nationalist ideas represent the image of Bengali women as progressive, but they still remain very strongly within the gendered framework of femininity.

Analysis of contested discourse between two poles of power

Introduction

From the inception of Bangla blogging, in 2005, to establish the *Jamati* political acceptance in the logic of protecting Islam, some bloggers became very active to disseminate the Islamist discourse in online. They were newly growing Islamist elite members, mostly male and influenced by right wing Saudi-Arabian Islamist tradition promoting by *Jamat-I-Islami*. The Islamist discourse in online and blogosphere is ideologically explicitly anti-secular. To protest them, the Bengali nationalist pro-liberation war bloggers ‘A-team’ was created to harass the Islamist ‘anti-liberation war’ blogger’s propaganda. Internet trolling by these two groups emerged as a distinctive blogging culture in which commenters and bloggers regularly used false identities to attack each other online. Their comments were full of vulgar slang and insults and they were known to hack each other’s personal accounts and manipulate the writings. These kinds of online behaviors became the central attraction of the Bangla blogosphere while the owners of these community blogs made efforts to keep good relations with both sides to make their sites popular. In this context, I will analyze the online battle between *Jamati* and Bengali nationalist discourses where idea sexual power relations embedded on these two discursive poles. First, I will analyze the emergence of the sexist virtual battle, and then I will focus on the discourses related to Shahbag. From the vast area of this debate, I will only focus on the gender aspects.

The emergence of sexist online Bengali nationalism discourse

From the beginning of Bangla blog, the blogging culture was explicitly aggressive. Moreover, the online sphere was saturated with pornography sites. That enhanced a sexist culture within the young, male internet users in Bangladesh. The ‘Liberation War vs. *Jamat*’ was one of the main burning issue in blogosphere (M. Z. Chowdhury 2014). In that debate both the ‘pro-Liberation’ nationalist and *Jamati* bloggers started to attack each other with vulgar words related with sexuality.¹⁰

In 2008, in one of the most visited adult sites of Bangladesh *Joubon Jala* (Adult urge),¹¹ one of the central figures of the ‘A-team’ (see chapter three) who claim to be a ‘Liberation-war researcher’ started to be active for advocating capital punishment of war criminals.¹² Besides posting sex stories in that site, he was very active not only on that site, but also in Facebook and his other online activities for online mobilization for signature campaign in demand for the punishment of war criminals form 2007. He expressed his plan to mobilize the demand for the punishment of war criminals are: “1. to collect supports for the trial of war, 2. to share the records of genocide in the Pakistani sites.”¹³ Therefore, according the plan, the demand for the execution of war crime trial

¹⁰ <http://www.somewhereinblog.net/blog/tushonblog/28529> last accessed 7th June

<http://www.somewhereinblog.net/blog/shomsheralamblog/28710059> last accessed 7th June

¹¹ Later it was banned but then reemerged with new name as *Joubon Jatra* (Adult way) with modification of ‘adult’ elements. See more <http://www.somewhereinblog.net/blog/omipialblog/28883734>

¹² He was referred to as ‘choti’ (Bengali porno text) with his name by his opposite poles of people as he was accused to be posting sex-stories and filmed women having sex and then post these in that site. See <http://www.somewhereinblog.net/blog/jatematal/28885098> . However at the same time, his obsession with spreading the demand of punishment of war criminals made him a leading figure as “Pro-Liberation War’ blogger and researcher.

¹³ Written in Bengali, translated by the author. See: https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151476969533363&set=a.41417608362.48223.515328362&type=1&stream_ref=10 Last accessed June 6

were hanged as a sticky post in the front page of it, stating that, “We didn’t come for the careless celebration of Liberation, we came for the demand of trial for war criminals, please participate in our plan.”¹⁴ He later confessed about the association of him with that adult site on his Facebook page. He said that, to gain the acceptance, he did the same thing as all the participant of that blog were doing, to use it as a place for political mobilization for demanding the punishment of war criminals. But he denied the accusation of using hidden camera to filming the sex scene. The logic that he gave to justify his online mobilization in that adult site is that:

“There has a legal right for a prostitute too to seek justice if anything wrong happened to her, even if she is a whore. And here we are talking about the civil rights; motivating those young men who were busy with adult contents, by saying that: now fix the country, correct the error done by the ancestors”¹⁵

This post created much debate in the blogosphere about the relevance and suitability of political mobilization against war crime of rape and genocide in an adult/pornographic site. It should be noted that most of the content of this site was made up of rape scenes or videos of nude girls recorded from hidden cameras. The filmed rape scenes was one of the most visited category of this site¹⁶. That prominent member of the A-team cooperated most actively with their plan to mobilize young male viewers of this site for war crime trial, and that was expressed as ‘our plan’ to getting support and mobilize young men for the trial of war criminals. However, most of the participants

¹⁴ Written in Bengali, translated by author. See: <http://www.somewhereinblog.net/blog/omipialblog/28883734> Last accessed June 6

¹⁵ Written in Bengali, translated by the author. See <http://www.somewhereinblog.net/blog/omipialblog/28884076> Last accessed June 6

¹⁶ Source: Written in Bengali by one blog writer with nick *jatematal*, translated by author. See: <http://www.somewhereinblog.net/blog/jatematal/28885098> Last accessed June 6

of the online debate of such mobilization were also male. Here is the summary and translation of one blog, posted on 18th December 2008 while the online mobilization for the demand of war crime trial was at its peak. The writer wrote this blog in support of the posting the demand of war crime trial in that adult site by dismissing the counter logic for this. His arguments are:

1. “People are saying that those bad men who visit those sites won’t want to see their sister’s nude body taken by hidden camera, but still they visit to see these. So, their argument is that, by these bad men, no good can be possible. I want to argue that no man can feel easy to visualize his father’s masturbation scene, but it’s normal for himself. So in these days where sexual pleasure can be satisfied by seeing sexy female bodies, it doesn’t mean that they are bad people who satisfy their pleasure with pornography.
2. There is not much difference between the consensual recording of these videos in exchange for money and the hidden record without consent. Both are humiliating and criminal acts of commodifying the female body. However, this doesn’t mean that whoever does these crimes doesn’t have the right to live a social life with human rights. And it doesn’t mean that they can’t love their country or hate the war criminals.
3. All Bangladeshis, including the thief, the robber, the evil, the whore and her clients, the viewers of porno sites have the right to hate the war criminals and to demand their punishment. Even if a dog can bite the ass of a war criminal it is to our benefit.
4. So, the man whose plan is to mobilize the viewers of the most viewed pornographic site, we must salute him.”¹⁷

¹⁷ My translation from Bengali. See <http://www.somewhereinblog.net/blog/nastikerdharmakathablog/28884548> Last accessed 6th June 2014. Later he changed his position and gave the counter argument of his previous one and others who are in support of the online political mobilization of that adult-site. However, his arguments are not considered

The arguments that the writer expressed here was representative of a group of extreme Bengali nationalists who mobilized in favor of war crime trials as part of ‘the plan.’ The plan was to target most of the young generation, explicitly males, to mobilize them in demanding the war crime trial for the punishment of the war criminals. And for that, besides other community blogs, the ‘A-team’ were active even in pornographic sites to reach to the target people. They were very active in attacking *Jamati* online discourse with vulgar and sexist slangs¹⁸. Therefore in Bengali blogs, vulgar slang words were invented and appropriated to attack or dismiss the Islamist and Jamati message, like ‘pondano’ (Fucking in ass), ‘choda’ (fuck), ‘Hogamara’(anal fucking), ‘Chagu’ (goat), Paki (Pakistani) or Tyana Pyachani (‘rolling a rope’ as a negative signifier of critical argumentation. Most of these vulgar and sexist words emerged and popularized from the Bengali ‘choti’ (popular pornographic story). The Islamist, Jamati supporter and ‘anti-Liberation War’ bloggers were tagged as ‘Chagu’ (goat) by the ‘A-team’ and the project of harassing them was referred as “chagu pondano” (fuck the goat)¹⁹. One such blog title written, was “chagur putki rakhibo byasto: Chaguram and co. ke sorboda pondanir upoe rakha hoy” (Will make busy the goat’s ass by nonstop fuck)²⁰.

Moreover, those who take positions beyond the two poles with their critical analysis, they are tagged as ‘sushil chagu’ (civil goat) by them. And those extreme nationalist bloggers dismiss their

here as an individual position, rather reflects the discourse of a collective opinion who supports it. See more <http://www.somewhereinblog.net/blog/nastikerdharmakathablog/28886020>

¹⁸ http://columnistsbd.blogspot.in/2014/05/blog-post_6712.html Last accessed 7th June 11, 2014

¹⁹ <http://www.ebangladictionary.com/29903/comment-page-1> Last accessed 7th June 11, 2014

²⁰ See: http://saguponda.blogspot.hu/2007/08/blog-post_06.html Last accessed 7th June 11, 2014

critical argumentation as ‘tyana paychachi’. ²¹ The words and their uses were not only limited to protest the misogynist *Jamati* propaganda, but also it soon became the weapon to dismiss the difference in arguments and opinions. The aggressive attitude with vulgar words in online debate thus became explicitly sexist and masculine. It should be noted that, not all bloggers used the same aggressive and sexist tone, rather this masculine and aggressive linguistic tone were used very few bloggers in actual numbers, but with multiple fake id’s and organized bullying they became extremely powerful and dominating. Moreover some of them became the legendary figures in online trolling in Bengali biosphere that created a masculine bullying culture in online discourse.

This sexist and aggressive masculine attitude in online upholds the idea of virility as an indispensable part of patriotism. The slang terms and insults invented and used are explicitly misogynist and representative of masculinity with aggression. Carol Cohn (1987), analyzed the military technological language used to describe weaponry and their uses as explicitly sexist. She as a participant observer within the masculine defense intellectual went through the process of learning that languages, and started to feel the sensation of it. Not only were the masculine aggressive words an indispensable part of the language used by military defense intellectuals but Cohn herself learned to speak that language which made her understand the masculine and gendered logic at work. However, she proposes the feminist task to analyze this discourse, which is twofold. One is to deconstruct these languages and the other is to reconstruct alternative voices by delegitimizing the previous ones (Cohn 1987). Her analysis is very useful to understand the Bengali nationalist blogging discourses and masculine trolling and the sensation of using these

²¹See: <http://www.istishon.com/node/4731> Last accessed 7th June 11, 2014

<http://forum.projanmo.com/topic41683.html> Last accessed 7th June 11, 2014

masculine languages in the name of patriotism. Whether the blogging discourse became much more explicitly aggressive through the use of false identities, it is not so different from reality. The online discourse is an exaggerated reality with extreme freedom of expression of those users which is typical for most of the online discourse (Papacharissi 2002). Therefore, the gendered social discourses are exaggerated in online sphere.

The emergence of online Bengali nationalist mobilization as part of the plan of the pioneer Bengali nationalist bloggers was fundamentally derived from gendered notion of masculinity. The adult/pornographic site where the demand of the punishment of war criminals was advocated, among the viewers of that site the rape scene of girls were very popular. Therefore, the apparent contradiction is, among those mobilizing for punishment of war criminals raped Bengali women are those who take pleasure from rape scenes. However, they are not contradictory since the nationalist response of war rape conceives it as the loss of ‘honor’ of women which is derived from patriarchal logic. The nationalist narrative of war rape in 1971 Liberation war is “loss of innocence or honor of mothers and sisters”. Rape has been used as a weapon of war following the logic of ‘women’s-body-as-men’s-possession’ who protects her sexual purity to uphold men’s honor. Nagel showed that in nationalist rhetoric, the territory/woman logic in effect denies the agency of women: ‘she’ is only man’s possession (1998 p. 249). The nationalist metaphor of nation-as-women suggests that “women become the battle ground of group struggle” (J Nagel 1998). The online nationalists who used the adult/porno site to target young men to spread the demand of punishment of war criminals didn’t problematize the ‘pleasure of viewing rape scene,’ and they insisted that those who took pleasure from those rape scenes can demand the punishment of war rapists who took the *ijjol* (respect) of the women of their nation. Therefore for them, war rape was understood as the penetration of the enemy into the nation/territory/women’s body which makes her body

impure. The sexist logic of nationalism thus expressed the idea that women's body should only be considered as an object of men's/the nation's ownership. Therefore, they can justify the demand of war criminals as a form of 'patriotism' where the subject is male and they are the owner of women's body (and the nation). Therefore, the demand of punishment for war rapists in online sphere as their political goal was derived from men's desire for vengeance in a male battle over the ownership of their women's bodies. Therefore at the same time having pleasure by viewing porno sites and rape scenes are not considered contradictory to them. Because, in viewing the pornographic sites and demanding the punishment of war criminals both has an overlapping area where these men can stand as the actor /subject where women are considered the object of their possession

Moreover, the logic to support the online mobilization in an adult site to protest the 'anti-Liberation' propaganda, one representative blog writer naturalizes the sexual violence as a sexual act to achieve pleasure when he argues that, "no man can feel easy to visualize his father's masturbation scene, but its normal for himself. So in these days where sexual pleasure can be satisfied by seeing sexy female bodies, it doesn't mean that they are bad people who satisfy their pleasure with pornography." Therefore, he is naturalizing the pleasure by sexual violence (as these sites are not only showing female bodies, but also the sexual acts are most often very violent to women). Moreover, when he is saying that, "There is not much difference between the consensual recording of these videos in exchange for money and the hidden record without consent" the agency of women as a subject is denied. In his thought, he was talking from a heterosexual male position, and his argumentation derived from the presumption where 'we' are the sexual subjects as male. When he doesn't differentiate between sexual violence and consensual sexual acts, his assumption of women's participation in sexual acts is only as the object where her consent doesn't matter at all.

Moreover, the online mobilization of stating that, “we came in demand to punish the war criminals” is very much gendered and classed. First, it excludes women, because they don’t even expect women to be viewers of this site, or even if they are, it is assumed that they won’t be ‘confident’ enough to express themselves as part of the virtual ‘pornographic viewer community.’ Therefore this ‘we’ is implying a male community which excludes women. As internet accessibility exaggerates the social inequality present in the real public sphere (Papacharissi 2002), this ‘we’ is explicitly classed as well, because to be a viewer of that site, one has to have access to a computer and internet connection and be able to read and write in Bengali who has the plenty of time to involve there. Only a privileged class of people can afford all those in Bangladesh.

Therefore, we can see that the Bengali nationalist demands for the punishment of war criminals on an adult site, the A-team’s invention/appropriation of slang terms, both the Nationalist and Islamist groups share an overlapping stance where they considered as the subject where women are the object of their possession.

From online Bengali nationalist vs. Islamist battle to Shahbag Protest

The plan of constructing online nationalist ideological community from 2005 bearing the aggressive masculine online discursive practice to attack *Jamati* propaganda was the background of Shahbag protest 2013. Since Shahbag protest was initiated by online activists and bloggers, ‘online activists’ suddenly became the main issue of discussions and debates in mainstream media and political discussion. The online activist and bloggers of this kind are very few in numbers comparing to the millions of participants of Shahbag movements, but they became heroes from

online to offline mainstream media. The ‘online activists’ nationalist heroes suddenly became national celebrities on the high days of Shahbag protest. Therefore, they could create a fear and trauma in online bullying and become influential in creating certain macho Bengali nationalist discourse in the online sphere where women were completely marginalized and silenced and used only as weapon of battle between two masculine groups.

The online battle between *Jamati* and Shahbag supporters

Whereas the capital punishments of the war criminals were the central demand of Shahbag protest, on 8th March, International Women’s Day, 2013, the representative Facebook page of the Shahbag protest, “*Shahbage Cyberjoddho*” (Cyber war of Shahbag),²² carried a post that stated:

“One women is great as a human being and her best power is motherhood, women is strong because of her motherhood thus we call our country mother, our motherland Bangladesh and her love and power in the land that we bear in our blood, Therefore it’s our duty to erase the scandal of that mother. The demand for the capital punishment is about to free her from the scandal. To demand the banning of the political rights of *Jamat-Shibir* is for the existence of this mother.”²³ (“একজন নারী মানুষ হিসেবে মহান, সেই নারীর সর্ব... - শাহবাগে সাইবার যুদ্ধ” 2014 Last accessed 6th June 11, 2014 .)

This nationalist rhetoric is describing women as human being whose strength lies in her motherhood. The emphasis on ‘motherhood’ and the question of erasing the ‘scandal of the mother’

²² While the protest was going on, the protestors established a tent in Shahbag square with several computers and named it as “cyber War” where they were attacking the *Jamati* and Islamist online Propaganda.

²³ Originally written in Bengali, translated by author. See

<https://www.facebook.com/shahbagecyberjuddho/posts/538980349478120> Last accessed 6th June 11, 2014

described as the responsibility of her sons which is a typical masculine voice of nationalism. As Massad (1995) explains that by considering women as mother and reproducers, not the agents of nationality, masculinity becomes nationalized and their role became secondary and supportive in the narrative of nationalism (Massad 1995). The word ‘*Kalanka*’ (scandal) expressed the idea of loss of innocence/purity/chastity and being violated by the rape of the enemy soldiers. As Peterson shows, the sexist (hetero) nationalist ideology that consider “the motherland as a woman’s body thus in danger of violation by foreign males/sperm” (Peterson 1999 p. 41). Peterson argues that this “patriarchal metaphor is a tacit agreement that men who cannot defend their woman/nation against rape have lost their ‘claim’ to that body, that land” (Peterson 1999 p. 41). Therefore the issue of the punishment of war rape to them was not an issue of violence against women, rather an issue of men’s defeat via the possession of “his” women’s body.

On the other hand, in responses of the mass uprising of Shahbag protest and its media focus, several blogs and Facebook pages were active to dismiss the demand of the punishment of war criminals. One of the leading sites among them was “Basher Kella’ (bamboo fort) which was constantly manipulating the demands and protests raised by Shahbag by using the Islamist logic. The anti-Shahbag discourses are in brief:

1. The accusation against war criminals are false, the *Jamati* leaders who are the accused war criminals didn’t support the Pakistani soldiers for mass killing and rape.
2. The atheist bloggers of Shahbah are claiming this in order to destroy Islamic superiority and morality;
3. They are promoting free sex and immorality in public place in the name of protest;
4. In the nights, Shahbag becomes the place of group sex;
5. The leaders of Shahbag practice free sex.

6. The female participants of Shahbag protests are whores;
7. The protesting girls smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, thus they are immoral;
8. Bags of used condoms were found after every night of Shahbag.

The Jamati/Islamist discourses of this kind were very strong in popularizing the negative image of the Shahbag protest calling on the religious values of the majority. They distorted the name of the central organization that was founded as “*Gonojagoron Moncho*” (Platform for peoples uprising) to ‘*Shahbag Jouno Jagoron*’ (sexual uprising of Shahbag). The site “Basher Kella” was banned after several killings of bloggers by Islamist fundamentalists and communal violence spreading all over the country after the death sentence of the most famous religious leader of *Jamat*. However, several alternative facebook pages have been created with the same name of “*Baser Kella*” (bamboo fort). They were sharing the fabricated and manipulated pictures of female protesters of Shahbag gatherings as girls wearing sexy clothes, having sex, and with bottles of alcohol or cigarettes in their hands.²⁴ One of the Facebook pages of this kind is explicitly pornographic, but their presentation seems to have been aimed at ‘showing’ the immorality of Shahbagi.²⁵ The pornographic sensation and the words to describe the free sex, adultery and immorality were one of the most effective weapons to use against Shahbag protesters because it challenged the ideal image of Muslim-Bengali women (see further in chapter five). Therefore it was an indispensable part of their propaganda.

²⁴ See <http://bdfactcheck.com/2013/05/19/late-night-party-goes-on-at-shahbag/> Last accessed 6 June 6, 2014 and <http://awamibrutality24.blogspot.hu/2013/09/historic-shahbag-square.html> Last accessed 6 June 6, 2014

²⁵ “Shahbagi” was a negative label given to the protesters by the Jamati group.

See: <https://www.facebook.com/newbasherkeilla> Last accessed on 6th June 6, 2014



The caption of this picture was: “See What happened in the Historic(?) Shahbag Square.”

Source: <http://awamibrutality24.blogspot.hu/2013/09/historic-shahbag-square.html>

Timeline Photos

Back to Album · একের ভিতর সব (All in One)'s Photos · একের ভিতর সব (All in One)'s Page

ঐতিহাসিক
রাতের প্রজন্ম চত্বর শাহবাগ

রাসূলুল্লাহ (সাঃ) বলেছেনঃ
"কোনো ব্যক্তির মিথ্যাবাদী হওয়ার জন্য এতটুকুই
যথেষ্ট যে, সে যা শুনে তাই যাচাই না করে বিশ্বাস
করে এবং অন্যের কাছে প্রচার করে।"
(সহিহ মুসলিম ১ম / হাঃ ৫)

একের ভিতর সব (All in One)
প্রজন্ম চত্বরে মধুর রাত্রিঃ

789 people like this

2,023 shares

View previous comments

6 of 564

Album Timeline Photos

Shared with: Public

Open Photo Viewer

Download

Report/Remove Tag

One example of the fabricated picture of Shahbag protest that disseminated by the Islamist web site.

Source: <http://bdfactcheck.com/2013/05/19/late-night-party-goes-on-at-shahbag/> Last accessed 6

June 6, 2014

On the other hand, to counter the *Jamati* propaganda, the virtual soldiers of the ‘cyber war’ created several pages online and on Facebook. The representative page of Shahbag protest publishes a picture of one of the central *Jamati* leader’s son to prove his ‘immorality’.

আল্লাহর আইন চাই সৎ লোকের শাসন চাই



লন্ডনে জামায়াত নেতা কামরুজ্জামানের ছেলে ওয়ামী শিবিরের ছাণ্ডদের চোখ কি বন্ধ থাকে?

The picture of the son of one *Jamati* leader was published in one of the representative web page of ‘cyber war’ named Projonmo chottor (generation square) with a narrative saying that, “I am not in favor of publishing this kind of picture. But when I see that the derailed generation of Jamat/Shibir accusing the protester of Shahbag as drag addicted or prostitute, then I can’t control myself. The ‘motherfucker’ slang is pronounced by me without my conscious intension. I realized that, to resist their propaganda, we need to publish the real face of these pigs”. Source: http://shahabag.blogspot.hu/2013/02/blog-post_6706.html

Moreover, there were several online sites pages from where the pictures and news have been shared of veiled women of the female student group of *Jamat-I-Islami*, “*Islami chatri Shongstha*” (Islamist

female student organization), with news describing their involvement in prostitution and immoral sexual practice as ‘sexual jihad’ with *Jamat/Shibir* leaders²⁶. The statement of one blog writer known as a prominent activist of Bengali nationalists whose blog name is *Sobak pakhi* (vocal bird) wrote:

“The females of Islami Chatri Songho think that, if they can marry the Shibir (student wings of Jamat-I-Islami) leaders, the heaven is confirmed. This idea becoming advances like that, if the girls can spend night the heaven is confirmed”²⁷.

The ‘adulterous’ and ‘immoral sexual behavior’ of the Islamist leaders were also used as the logic to prove them uncivilized and backward. An audio record of extra-marital phone sex of the most famous leader of *Jamat-I-Islami*, Delwar Hossain Saydee, was published and circulated online to prove his adultery and immorality. Stories about female members of *Jamat* in extra-marital sexual relations or placed as ‘sex-slaves’ of Jamati leaders were published to dismiss the moral/religious superiority and decent lifestyle of the Jamati/Islamist leaders.²⁸

On the one hand, the Islamist/*Jamati* representation never considered women as being anything beyond the sexual objects of men. The ideology of the veil spread by most of the Imams²⁹ of the country is rooted in the assumption that women have to be covered since they are the sex objects

²⁶ See <http://aparadhkantha.wordpress.com/2013/10/01/543/> Last accessed 6 June 6, 2014

And <http://aparadhkantha.wordpress.com/2013/08/26/csongstha/> Last accessed 6 June 6, 2014

²⁷ <http://m.somewhereinblog.net/blog/sobak/28990506> Last accessed 6 June 6, 2014

²⁸ <http://www.somewhereinblog.net/blog/paglaaziz/29739248> Last accessed 6 June 6, 2014

²⁹ Religious leaders who preach in the mosques.

and showing that sensual object will ‘misguide’ men towards adultery. That idea was explicitly published on the 13 point charter put forth by *Hefajot-I-Islam* in responses to the Shahbag protest.

Where number four demand was:

“In the name of freedom of speech and free society, all the indecent and immoral activities, free mixing between man and woman, adultery, practice of alien culture like candle lighting and foreign cultural aggression must be stopped.” (“Status Quo versus Those Crazy 13 Points, a Nonagenarian Cleric and the Angry Young Men” 2014)

Female bodies are considered provocative and female sexuality is in need of being controlled in this ideology. Islamist discourses here are therefore expressed this ideology of controlling women’s body and sexuality. According to their logic men are considered sexual subjects whose desire for women’s body is ‘natural’. This kind of ideology expressed on these online sites and in the demand of *Hefajot-I-Islam* also upholds the idea that the women who don’t cover according to Islam are the provocation and the main reason for all the immorality practiced in the name of equality. Therefore both the groups positioned and used women and sexuality to indicate the immorality of men/actor of the groups. The ‘immoral sexual’ stories shared by the Islamist groups by depicting the female protesters as ‘prostitutes’, they defy the credibility of the protesters and deny the accusation of war crimes as a ‘conspiracy against Islam’. Besides that, while the Islamist propaganda attacked the female protesters of Shahbag for their non-Islamic appearance and dress to prove them ‘immoral’ and ‘unsocial’, the same logic of ‘veiled’ women has been used to accuse the Islamists of being ‘uncivilized’ or ‘backward’ by Bengali nationalists. So the women’s clothes and appearance became the marker of Identity in mutual attack.

As Tonkiss explains, the importance of discourse analysis lies in the fact that, “language is viewed as a social practice which actively orders and shapes people’s relation to their social worlds”

(Tonkiss 1998 p. 249). Therefore the online discourses of these two groups are in fact representing the salient elements by which they are related to each other to social meanings and processes.

Taj Hashmi (2000) argues, that there is a difference of the two types of misogyny between the preachers of Islamist leaders and its counterpart secular patriotic narrative. Hashmi argues, one the one hand mullahs of Bangladesh with their misogynist concepts are the one who has the authority to interpret the Quran thus became the promoter of misogyny in its worst form; and on the other hand the liberal patriotic narrative of empowerment often became an ideology of global corporate capital to exploit poor women's labor in the name of economic emancipation (Hashmi 2000). Therefore the similarities between those about women is that, "the reciprocity between the misogynous mullah and his "secular" admirers, including sections of the highly educated Bangladeshis, strengthens my hypothesis that i) the average man is a promoter of patriarchy if not misogyny and that ii) the worst of crimes and injustice can be legitimized in the name of an overpowering ideology, such as religion and patriotism." (Hashmi 2000 p. 44). Therefore for both of the poles of Islamists and the extreme nationalists discourse in the name of patriotism, the patriarchal logic of women as a sexual object of men became the shared stance.

The gendered and misogynist propaganda of the Islamist and Jamati sites are explicit and no doubt criticized by not only the feminists, but also by most of the educated middle class liberal citizen of Bangladesh (see more in chapter six). However, not only the aggressive and sexist discourse of the nationalist are not questioned and criticized by the feminists, rather most of the feminist organizations are making ally with nationalists.

Conclusion:

In this chapter, I analyzed some online writings as the representatives of the discursive battle between radical Bengali nationalists and Jamati followers to understand how these discursive attacks to each other are gendered. The emergence of online mobilization in demand of crime trial was very aggressive and rested on patriarchal notions of nationalism which actually made the platform from where the demand of the capital punishment in Shahbag protest 2013 emerged. Therefore, in the discourses about the issue of war rape and its punishment was became the weapon in the battle between the two heteropatriarchal poles. Here men are the actors/subjects and women and their bodies are considered the objects whose sexuality needs to be controlled by men. This discursive battle that was exaggerated by the Shahbag protest was rooted in that (hetero)patriarchal or sexist attitude. Therefore, despite the huge and prominent participation of women in the Shahbag protest, in the online discursive part of it, women's body and sexuality became only the weapon of attack for the two poles of power. Therefore both the group of 'Islamist/ 'anti-Liberation war' and nationalists/'pro-Liberation' shared the overlapping gendered idea about women's body and sexuality. I will discuss this shared gendered position of both Islamists and nationalists to critically analyze feminist alliance with Bengali nationalists and Shahbag protest in the next chapter.

Feminist Movements in Bangladesh, Bengali Nationalism and Shahbag Protest

Introduction:

In this chapter, I will discuss the history and context of feminist movements of Bangladesh and analyze its relation with Bengali national ideology to explore and problematize the feminist alliance of Shahbag protest. For that, I will contextualize the contest between Islamist and feminist positions in Bangladesh, where secular nationalist and feminist alliance opposing the Islamist fundamentalist violence/threats towards women that have been encountered in Bangladesh. Therefore, my discussion will be an analysis of the idea of ‘Islam vs. women’ which is dominant discourse to the nationalist-feminist ally. I will situate this ‘Islam vs. women’ discourse within the dilemma between global political context and local Islamist misogyny to analyze the nationalist-feminist ally in Shahbag protest more critically.

Feminist Organizations in Bangladesh and its Relation with Islam

In Bangladesh, women's organizations historically have been aligned with the nationalist movement for liberation (Chowdhury 2009). Chowdhury explains that the Bengali nationalist movement was focused on the secular idea of creating a difference in identity from the Pakistani Islamic state, an ideology which coincides with the women's movement influenced by ‘modernizing’ forces of international development agendas and discourses from the independence and afterwards. The development discourse emphasized inclusion of women in the public sector, a

rights-based call to provide education to females, legal rights and other civil rights, which were informed by a liberal feminist discourse. The secular and nationalist stance of women's organizations considered the Islamist discourse as a counter development force, backward and main enemy for women's oppression of Bangladesh. It's also coincides with the demand for a trial of Bengali Islamist war criminals who were the collaborators of Pakistani soldiers and were against the liberation of Bangladesh. Basically, with this demand, the urban based progressive movements in Bangladesh have collectively taken a strong stance against Islamization (Chowdhury 2009). However, as Karim (2004) explained, this elite, Bengali, nationalist, secular, urban ideology was much aloof from the rural people's life. At the same time, rural life was much influenced by folk Islamist tradition in mixture with Persian Sufi ideology which is different from the *Jamati Islami* idea of Islam (Karim 2004). Therefore, the rural masses were not that much influenced by the Islam vs. Bengali contest.

Renewal of the idea of Islam vs. Women

However, the intervention of development organizations and Middle East funded Islamic Qawmi³⁰ Madrasa's education since the 1980's had changed the scenario in rural Bangladesh and took the contested discourse of 'Islam vs. women' to a different level. Moreover, the factors of economic globalization and the adaptation of structural adjustment policy of World Bank and IMF in 90's created an industrial boom in garments sector, that targets rural poor women as cheap labor and integrating them with productive forces threatens the conventional gender roles of rural patriarchy

³⁰ The Qawmi refers to a specific kind of Islamic education different from Alia Madrasa that was dominant and established institutionally in British colonial period. Theologically it followed Deobandi model which is more fundamentally related to Sunni Muslim ideology. These type of Islamic Madrasa education are not controlled by government, but rather funded by outer sources.

(Karim 2004). At the same time, the foreign funded NGOs and local women's organizations working in the framework of women in Development (WID) whose work with women slowly modify traditional patriarchal gender roles in rural society (Karim 2004). The growing number of development activities emphasized on women's empowerment through micro credit with huge foreign aid. Karim (2004) also explains that this approach focuses much more on mainstreaming of feminist activism with development organizations rather than ensuring gender mainstreaming in rural level. Therefore the feminist's voice and activism of Bangladesh merged within the foreign funded development organizations. As Nazneen Shifa named it as "nine-to-five feminism" where rhetoric of gender equality became a kind of compliance issue ("New Age | The Outspoken Daily" 2014). Moreover, with the narrative of women empowerment, Karim (2004) argued that, micro-credit instrumentally appropriated normative gender relations and rural women's shame and honor in the name of empowerment which was actually driven from the capitalist interest of NGOs (Karim 2004). Simultaneously, in military regime of Ziaur Rahman and later of General H. M Ershad until 1990, the newly emergent *Jamat-I-Islami* political ideology tried to 'correct' Islam from its previous multiple and heterogeneous ideologies of Islam rooted in folk traditions by investing huge Saudi Arabian funds to established those Madrasas³¹ in all over the countries. This Madrasa education advocated the rise of religious fundamentalism in rural areas and the militant Islamist ideology became stronger in rural Bangladesh.

Lamia Karim (2004) argues, increasing demand of women labor in garments sector, foreign funded WID focused women's organizations and emergence of Madrasa educations, those three factors

³¹ The Qawmi refers to a specific kind of Islamic education different from Alia Madrasa that was dominant and established institutionally in British colonial period. Theologically it followed Deobandi model which is more fundamentally related to Sunni Muslim ideology. These type of Islamic Madrasa education are not controlled by government, but rather funded by outer sources.

heavily influenced the Bangladeshi social, political and economic situation in rural level in 80's and onward. The increasing influence of Quami Madrasas and NGO funded women's organizations emphasized on girls education resulted in tension and competition between clergy and developmentalism where both groups struggled to define an autonomous sphere and compete for same clientele, which is the children of the rural poor (Karim 2004). Moreover, the women's organizations emphasized on eliminating violence against women in coalition with NGOs role of women's empowerment and the inclusion of women in market economy through micro credit and the garments sector, changed the rural domestic and family ideology which creates very angry response of Islamist militant leaders in rural areas (Hashmi 2000). In this context, the Madrasa and NGO/women's organizations ideologies emerged as conflicting to each other to the point of producing violent reactions such as rise of *fatwa*³² against women in rural level.

In this context, the Salman Rushdie controversies, known as the Rushdie Affair³³ in 1988 and in protest of demolition of the Babri Masque in India in 1992³⁴ led to communal violence in Bangladesh by giving *fatwas* to ban the Rushdie's book and demanding death penalty for him and attacking religious temples of Hindu minorities. The consequences of all these global communal factors fueled violent militant revival in Bangladesh. Moreover, in 1994, Islamist militant leaders

³² Fatwa is the religious legal opinion provided by Islamist religious leaders. It became a very debated and contested issue in Bangladesh, since in rural level, 'fatwa' sometimes practiced as a parallel to 'law' and it abusive practice by powerful groups. The feminist organizations are also fighting for the banning of Fatwa because of its use in abusive practices against women.

³³ It refers to the violent reaction after publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in the UK in 1988. Many Muslims were angry and violent as they accused the author of blasphemy.

³⁴ On December 6 in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, India, the 16th Century mosque named 'Babri mosque' was destroyed by some Hindu volunteer to establish a Hindu Mandir in the name of Ram (Hindu God) in an attempt to reclaim the land known as the birthplace of Ram. It caused huge communal violence and at least 2000 people were killed. On December 6, 1992, a large crowd of

gave fatwa and death threats to feminist writer Taslima Nasreen, which drove her into exile. Taslima Nasreen is a prolific and at the same time debated writer and columnist. She is also enthusiastically followed by the urban young generation of early 90's by her courageous and blunt opinion on gender discrimination and sexual violence in society (Siddique 2010). She also openly celebrates female sexuality and sexual agency and explicitly criticizes Islam, "which she blamed for the plight of Bangladeshi women" (Siddique 2010 p.219).

However, Dina Siddique (2010) explained that, it was not her writing on Islam that was the main cause for what she was threatened by Islamist leader, rather her book *Lajja* (shame), that was banned was about a Hindu family that was forced to migrate in India because of communal violence. Siddique argued that the death threat for which she was forced into exile, made her celebrity in western feminist circles where she was presented as an individual resistant writer who is the victim of religious fundamentalism. Siddique explains that, this special construction of the 'victimhood' of Taslima Nasreen doesn't question the western feminist superiority and didn't consider the complex context of it (Siddique 2010). Siddique also argued that most of the feminist organizations and NGOs have been silent about her, not raising their voice or taking steps for her because of her explicit focus on sexual politics of female body and sexuality which made her a taboo-topic within even the feminist groups (Siddique 2010). Therefore, these issues all were combined together powerfully in creating a 'women vs. Islam' discourse to the broader public in the country.

Deconstructing 'Islam vs. War crime Trial/Women'

By 1992, on the one hand, there was the rise of militant Islamic ideology with *Jamat-I-Islam* in coalition with BNP. And on the other hand, the demand of the punishment of accused war criminals who are the leaders of *Jamat-I-Islami* emerged with the leadership of Jahanara Imam and her organization of *Ghtaok dala nirmul cometee*. In the same vein, the recognition of war rape as a war crime stimulates international organizations and NGO's to collect the stories and evidence of rape (Mookherjee p. 436). In this context, from 90's onward, those demanding that war criminals to be tried and women's organizations associated with NGOs, liberal, left, secular intellectuals and activists became allies in a nationalist standpoint in demanding the punishment of accused *Jamati* leaders. Therefore, the ideas of 'women vs. Islam' and 'Islam vs. war crime trial' merged together and women organizations and nationalists constructed an 'Islam vs. war crime trial/women' discourse. At this very important moment, Bengali nationalist interests, feminist organizations, NGO's, liberal, left civil societies are all came together in demand of the punishment of those Islamist leaders. The 'Islam vs. women' discourse is also a strong part of it.

Women's/feminist organizations and the critical voices in Shahbag protest

Several feminist and women's organizations were actively supported and participated in the Shahbag protest. However, like most of the major political events, their voice was marginalized. This marginalization can have two reasons. One is the dominant liberal way of thinking of feminists and another is the difficulties to raise a critical voice separate from the polarized ideology of Islam vs. Liberation war.

From the alliance of Shahbag protest the women's organizations could get the chance to be on the limelight only on three occasions related Shahbag protest. One is 8th March 2013, on the occasion

of International Women's day; the main stage was dedicated to the women. *Gonojagoron moncho* contacted all the women organizations to take the control of the main stage and play the role as the as chief guest, discussant and viewers. In that gathering, the leaders of women organizers were demanded the capital punishment of the accused war criminals and to end all kind of religious fundamentalism. The slogan was dedicated for that day was "*Nari Diboser Ongikar, Rukhbo ebar razakar*" (The oath of the women's day is to resist the collaborators). On that meeting, the chairperson of TIB (Transparency International Bangladesh) and *Ain o Shalish Kendro* (an organization for legal aid) Sultana Kamal, who is one of the pioneer feminist voice of Bangladesh told that, "All women need to be with the pro-Liberation force to go ahead".³⁵ However, since there was a cocktail blast besides the main stage, the focus was transformed to that and the women's participation on that day did not represented as a significant event in the whole trajectory of Shahbag protest.

The second occasion was on 26th of March to celebrate the declaration of Liberation of Bangladesh with 14 *Biranganas* who appeared in white sari, organized by a feminist NGO and the leaders of the Shahbag protest³⁶, demanding the identity of 'freedom Fighter' by giving up the identity of Birangana. They were mostly the poor village women and were reflecting that same voice raised by this feminist NGO. The appearance of them in white sari as a symbol of de-sexualizing their identity and the sexual politics related to it was discussed in the 4th chapter.

³⁵ <http://www.banglamail24.com/index.php?ref=ZGV0YWlscy0yMDEzXzAzXzA4LTk5LTl3MjI3>

³⁶ From 2009, the international war crime tribunal has established for the trial of war criminals, especially for the Bengali collaborators who helped the Pakistani military to genocide and rape. To protest the verdict of one of the central figure of war criminals, Bengali nationalist online activists called a demonstration in Shahbag square in 5 February 2013 which became a huge gathering of people for almost 3 months and became one of the leading news in the international media by comparing it with the Tahrir Square and now named as "Shahbag Protest 2013".

The third occasion was organized by feminist and women rights organizations from all over the country to resist the *Hefajot-I-Islams* fundamentalist demand of banning women's participation in public places which was discussed earlier in chapter five. To protest Hefajoti's misogynist demands, all the prominent women's organizations, human rights organizations and other NGOs organized together and held another grand rally on 20th June 2013. Seuty Sabur wrote that, in that protest "each speech was condemning the "fundamentalist" forces: *Hefajat-e-Islam* in this case. Each celebrated the secular 'Bengali' nationalism fashionably" ("Seuty Sabur: Did 'NGOization' Deradicalize the Women's Movement? | ALAL O DULAL" 2014). Sabur correctly problematized the NGOization of feminist movements of Bangladesh which remain within the trope of 'Islam vs. women' discourse and became stronger as a consequence of Shahbag protest. Seuty Sabur (2013) also problematized this masculine forms of online chauvinism and the nationalist rhetoric about loss of *ijjat* (Chastity/honor) in her that online article beyond the enthusiasm of 'female factor' of Shahbag protest. However a rigorous analysis and critique of the gendered nationalist rhetoric about the demand of the punishment of war criminal and the issue of war rape is remarkably missing in the feminist analysis of Bangladesh.

There were several individual feminist thinkers have had a discomfort to the alliance with nationalist rhetoric and shared within small groups. For example, I was called to participate in a live television talk-show about the online activism in the 3rd day of Shahbag protest with some key figures of online Bengali nationalists. In that show, when I tried to put light on the gendered and classed elements in online sphere, my logic was dismissed by the one who is considered the predecessors of online Bengali nationalists in the logic of that, anyone can hide their identity in online, therefore social media is the one where gender can't be an issue. I was also criticized after

the show for ‘bringing these ‘negative’ issues in the high days of Shahbag protest, when it’s not the time to discuss about’. It should be noted that it’s almost a typical thing of any revolutionary struggle, when women raised the question of gender and sexuality, it has been said that it’s not the time for discuss this; it’s not the immediate demand³⁷. Moreover, the outright denial of gender inequality in online sphere expressed by that leading figure of online Bengali nationalists by the notion of biological gender identity which did not consider the gendered attitudes in linguistic communication in online sphere and the inseparability of social hierarchy with it (Papacharissi 2002).

After one year of Shahbag protest, there were several publications came up with description and analysis about the protest. For example: “*Shahbager Rastroprokolpo*”(The State-project of Shahbag) by Parvez Alam, “*Gonoadalot theke Gonojagoron Moncho*”(From Peoples trial to Stage of Peoples Rise) by Shahriar Kabir, “*Rajniti Dhormo Chetona*”(Politics, Religion, Conscience) by Bidhan Riberu. Although most of the publications were actually the uncritical descriptions of Shahbag protest, some of them had a different analysis from it and critical about the Islam vs. Liberation polarization and the homogenizing the plurality of Shahbag protest. (Riberu 2014, Parvez 2014). There was only a book published by a feminist organization which is “*Shahbag Projonmo Chottor: Tarunner Obisworonio Jagoron*” (Shahbag Projonmo Chottor: Unforgettable Rise of the Youth) by Kokeya Kabir, and that was derived from an uncritical position of Bengali nationalism which again show the importance to make a critical feminist position of gendered Bengali nationalism in Bangladesh.

³⁷ See <http://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1920/lenin/zetkin1.htm> Last accessed 6th June 11, 2014

Rethinking Islam vs. Women in Bangladesh

The orientalist perspective of oppressed ‘Muslim women’ in opposition to Western liberated white women is deeply rooted in the history of colonialism and in the emergence of the idea of secularism. As Marnia Lazreg (1995) shows, the idea of Algerian women as ‘Muslim’ and oppressed was represented not only in colonial texts but also in the Western/American feminist tradition, with feminism and Islam or ethnic identity of Middle East represented as the binary opposite to each other (Lazreg 1995). Lazreg examines the colonial dominant narrative to deconstruct this superiority of Western feminism. On the other hand, French theorist Jean-Luc Nancy explains that the western idea of secularism emerged with Christianity and is therefore a modern concept linked with a Christian way of thought and experience (Nancy 2008). Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood also explain the liberal politics behind the idea of secularism where ‘Islam vs. secular’ discourse emerged in a certain Western historical and political interest (Asad 2003; Mahmud 2006). Moreover, Lila Abu-Lughod argued that after 9/11, this took a new dimension of opposition of liberal vs. conservative/fundamentalist/terrorist Islam that justifies the need of saving Muslim women by liberal/feminist interest and support ‘war on terror’ as well. She therefore deconstructs the liberal thought of saving Muslim women from her ‘veil’ to justify the American invasion of Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2002)

Moreover, Elissa Helms (2008) shows, based on her ethnographic work in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the secular urge to Islamist nationalist for not to suppress the New Year celebration because the Islamists were trying to stop this by the logic that it is un-Islamic. The secular urge to Islamist nationalist was presented through the gendered image coded as ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ women’s embrace. She shows that, this gendered presentation of Muslim/Eastern vs. Western identity are

actually part of a number of contested reconfigurations of east/west, Islam/ Europe, tradition/modernity (Helms 2008). Her analysis is also vital to understand the identity contest in the name of religion and cultural nationality which is played out over the behavior and dress of women. Moreover, she showed, this identity contest reaffirmed by such dichotomous representations which actually masks a much greater complexity of global, regional, and local dynamics.

Therefore, in the post 9/11 global context, the ‘Islam vs. modernity’ discourse has become an issue for feminists. In that context, it is crucial for feminist stance of Bangladesh to deal with both Islamist fundamentalists and Islamophobic global discourse that influence the secular nationalists. This global-local relation and dilemma of this ‘women vs. Islam’ discourse became a crucial issue to raise feminist positions and arguments in Bangladesh. It also becomes a vital issue to understand the feminist association of Shahbag protest. As Chowdhury explained, it has become a challenging question to deal with transnational western feminist academic critiques and rural women’s lives and problems caused by religious fundamentalism (E. H. Chowdhury 2011). In that context, where women’s organizations are mostly focused on achieving equality in law and on economic autonomy in the name of ‘empowerment’, the issue of sexuality and sexual politics remain completely silent (Azim 2000). To confront Islamist misogynist militancy, most of the feminist groups are making alliances with Bengali secular nationalists. However, while the misogynist preaching of Islamic fundamentalist leaders rooted in the sexist logic of men’s ownership of women’s body and sexuality by treating women as only sexual objects, the nationalist assumption of ‘mother image’ of the nation and the idea of ‘lost innocence’ of raped women, were also rooted in the same logic. However, when most of the feminist organizations were criticizing Islamist backwardness in relation to their stance on women, they are not addressing the sexual politics of

nationalist thought. The nationalist-liberal rhetoric not only doesn't address the underlying sexist logic of nationalism, it also remains uncritical of neo-liberal and modernist stereotyped idea of Muslim backward women

Conclusion:

In this chapter I tried to deconstruct the 'liberal/nationalist/progressive vs. Islamist/backward' discourse in global-local context. In Bangladesh, in context of this global political orientalist and Islamophobic idea and the misogynist uprising of Islamist fundamentalism in rural level, it became a crucial issue for feminist organizations to set the priority of agenda and political alliances. Most of them are allied with nationalists to confront the Islamic fundamentalist attitude and they were very active in the Shahbag protest as well. However, the typical 'secular/liberal/progressive vs. Islamist' idea restricted them from analyzing the sexist roots of nationalism. I want to argue that, this alliance should be critically scrutinized and examined and feminists should be distanced from the gendered notion of nationalism for a more critical and effective feminist position.

Conclusion

Shahbag protest 2013 is a massive political event whose continuity is still vital for Bangladeshi history. In my research, the high days of that protest was a case to look at the gendered elements of the online discursive battle between Islamists and Bengali nationalist about the war crime trial. While the misogynist ideology instigated by Islamist fundamentalists of the country and criticized by the feminist and women's organizations, the gendered rhetoric of Bengali nationalism is not questioned by them. Rather, the liberal-secular stance of the nationalists considered as an acceptable political ally to most of the feminist organizations. In this research I contextualize this alliance between nationalist and feminists in political history of Bangladesh and connected it with global orientalist rhetoric of 'Islam vs. preogress'. By this, I wanted to make a scholarly contribution in feminist knowledge by making a much needed criticism of gendered Bengali nationalism in context of Bangladesh. .

The discursive battle about Shahbag protest that was exaggerated in online was rooted in that patriarchal or sexist attitude. Therefore, despite the huge and prominent participation of women in the Shahbag protest, in the online discursive part of it, women's body and sexuality became the weapon of attack for both the poles of this battle. Both the Islamists and Bengali nationalists used gendered issues like war rape, adultery, women's proper dress codes and women's weapons to attack each other's. Therefore, both of the poles shared the overlapping gendered idea about women's body and sexuality. In this shared stance, women became the symbol of men's honor and that honor is defined by her sexual submission and 'purity'. However, while

feminists and women organizations are fighting against Islamists clergy and misogyny to achieve gender equality in law and civil rights, they are not addressing sexual politics lies in the nationalist ideology. In this research thus I want to make a feminist critique beyond these two poles of ideology and advocates to raise a third position that can be critical to both of the masculine ideologies.

The central focus of this research is to explore the gendered rhetoric of Bengali nationalism through discursive battle between Islamists and Nationalist and therefore to problematize the uncritical alliance between feminists and Bengali nationalists. To do that, I mainly analyzed the discourses of online sphere. Moreover, I analyzed my personal involvement and experience of that and discussions with some prominent actors of Shahbag protest.

To analyze the online discourses, the key concepts those I used to connect each other for explaining the case of online battle between Shahbag protest and feminist alliance, are, nationalism, masculinity, women's body and sexuality in national rhetoric. I analyzed that the women's body, appearance and her sexuality used as the symbol of the masculine and sexist nationalist idea. I also critically engaged with the orientalist global politics to relate the 'Islam vs. progress' discourse which is a determinant factor of constructing the oppositional idea of Bengali linguistic identity and Muslim religious identity. Moreover, I also analyzed the discourse of virtual sphere to show how it is rooted on the power languages of gender and at the same time exaggerate it.

Before going to analyze the specific online discourse of a specific political event that is Shahbag protest, I situated this historical event in the political history of the contested debated of national identity by which the demand of war crime trial and punishment of the accused criminals became a complicated political issue. I showed that, the emergence of Muslim and Bengali

nationalisms were embedded with anti-colonial movement and anti-Pakistani conscience. This historical trajectory related to the emergence of online Bengali nationalism in parallel of the demand of war crime trial in the post Liberation era in Bangladesh in which the Shahbag protest 2013 is grounded.

On the next chapter, in relation to the political history of identity contest, I analyze the Bengali-Muslim woman's image for connecting this with Shahbag protest and its gendered war between Bengali nationalist and Islamist discourses. Muslim and Bengali women constructed as opposite to each other as the signifier of progressive vs. backward women in Bengal and Bangladesh and this oppositional idea also influenced its representations of Shahbag protest and its challenges. The stereotypical progressive vs. backward idea of femininity referred to Bengali vs. Muslim women caused this historical construction. The idea of Bengali women articulated with the idea of secularism, spiritual superiority, purity, aesthetic, decency and motherly emotion and the image of Muslim women was constructed as backward, uncivilized, fundamentalist and oppressed. However, both of them have the shared underlined similarity of the idea of femininity. Therefore, the idea of Bengali Muslim women of Bangladesh, emerged in a process of combining these two apparently opposite idea of womanhood with a mixture of liberated, educated, decent and modern women, whose head and chest are well covered with her sari, but not completely cover the face like veil. She is educated, practicing Muslim, but liberal as well. The process of symbolized these ideas of Bengali and Muslim womanhood, represented through their appearance, and became the bearer of Identity rather than the actual agent of this identity. The Bengali blogosphere and online community emerged with a masculine sexist culture which expressed by their political debates, especially about the issues of war crime trial and national identity. The 'Liberation War vs. *Jamat*' was one of the main burning issue in blogosphere

where both the ‘pro-Liberation’ nationalist and *Jamati* bloggers started to attack each other with vulgar words related with sexuality. The online battle between *Jamati* and Bengali nationalist discourses rooted in the sexual power relations which become very explicit in the high days of Shahbag protest. The online sphere became a discursive battleground for both of these two poles. The pro-Shahbag Bengali nationalist, secular and the Islamist, pro-Jamati, supporters of accused and convicted war criminals both share an overlapping stance where they considered the male members as the subject where women are the object of their possession by attacking each other with women’s body, appearance and sexuality.

While, the masculine characteristics of nationalism is in general criticized by feminist critiques. In the making of nation, the gendered notion of nationalism reproduces and strengthen gender inequality in imagining the nation and for the political mobilization of nationalist movements. However, in Bangladesh, it is crucial to identify the gendered assumption of Bengali nationalism. The gendered idea of nationalism was not critically examined here because; the secular Bengali nationalism is opposing the anti-secular Islamist fundamentalism that are against gender equality in inheritance law and other civil rights. Therefore, the Bengali nationalists became an ally of liberal feminists and NGOs to protest the misogynist propaganda. Therefore the feminist scholarly discourses in Bangladesh were not very critical in analyzing the underlying gendered assumptions of Bengali nationalism and to make a critical examination of liberal masculine nationalist rhetoric. The contest between Islamist and feminist positions in Bangladesh, secular nationalist and feminist came together in opposition to Islamist fundamentalist violence/threats towards women that have been encountered in Bangladesh. Therefore, the idea of ‘Islam vs. women’ emerged which is a dominant discourse to the nationalist-feminist ally. This ‘Islam vs. women’ discourse is also an ideological product of global politics. Therefore, for the feminists

of Bangladesh it is important not to subscribe this idea without distancing their arguments from the orientalist and Islamophobic construction. However, at the same time, the rise of Islamist fundamentalism and their misogynist propaganda need to be protested. I want to argue that, to fight against global orientalist idea of Islam vs. women and Islamist misogyny, the secular nationalist stance shouldn't be an uncritical ally for Bangladeshi feminists. A more critical distance from Bengali nationalists is needed to fight against all kind of gendered power relations. I therefore want to make a scholarly contribution in feminist knowledge by making this much needed criticism of gendered Bengali nationalism in context of Shahbag protest in Bangladesh by this research.

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