

Ethical Encounters: Gender, Vulnerability and Agency in Bangladesh Liberation War (*Muktijuddho*) Films

In 2009 the Awami League government set up the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in Bangladesh to investigate and prosecute suspects for the genocide committed in 1971 by the Pakistan Army and their local collaborators. The ICT initially received international assistance from the United Nations and the European Union, however, since the beginning of the trials several human rights organizations and international legal figures have raised objections to the court proceedings for issues of fairness and transparency. Annual public opinion polls in Bangladesh regularly rank the war-crimes trials among the top three "positive steps that the government has taken", and public demand for justice and closure for victims of 1971 remain strong. In historical and cultural memorializations of the 1971 war for Bangladeshi independence, the treatment of women's experiences – more specifically the unresolved question about acknowledgment of and accountability to birangonas, "war heroines" (or rape survivors) has met with erasure or victimization. While official documentation of war time atrocities remains sparse and difficult to access, film, fiction, personal essays and memoir provide a rich archive to personal and national suffering during the War of Independence. This paper will engage the critical question "What are the intersections of film, politics, and human rights advocacy? In what ways are the interconnected histories of struggles in the South Asian region, and Bangladesh in particular, communicated through national cinema? What roles do socially-engaged popular films play in social and political mobilization, transformation and activism around questions of justice and human rights?"

Building on the arguments that human rights narratives have the capacity to bolster/impede human rights advocacy (Schaffer and Smith 2004) and render legible what cannot be verified by raising the possibility and impossibility of recuperating narratives of violence (Hartman, 2008), this project explores the necessity of an 'ethical engagement' with irrecuperable human catastrophe such as the genocide of 1971. Specifically, I analyze woman-centered political films about the *Muktijuddho*, which engender nuanced public dialogue on gender, healing and agency and contributes to the broader movement for political and social justice for survivors of 1971. My purpose is not to recuperate the catastrophic past, in fact in itself an impossible endeavor; nevertheless, I argue that an ethical reckoning moves us to reflect upon artistic/filmic abstractions of social abjections as a political project. If we accept that the catastrophic loss might negate full representation, that the harm exceeds language (Butler, 2002), we can strive for an ethical engagement that elicits a deeper appreciation of differentiated agency, vulnerability, and humanity.