

Subversion of Colonial Masculinity and Manifestation of Gendered Nationalism in *Letters of 1971 (Ekattorer Chithi)*

Sahelee Parveen Dipa

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh

sahlee.engsust@gmail.com | ORCID: 0000-0002-3164-3602

Abstract

Bengali males, in colonial hegemonic discourse, were projected as “weak” and “submissive” (Macaulay qtd. in Chowdhury 4; Banerjee 29; Ray 21). This tendency of feminizing colonized males was naturalized through the process of constant discursive practices by the end of the nineteenth century. This discourse, as has been demonstrated by different historiographies, had influenced the self-perception of the Bengalis to a large extent. However, the colonial resistance and nationalist movements proved to be a fruitful site for the Bengalis to counter the negative portrayal of their masculine selves (Chattopadhyay 271). Again, emerging nationalist discourses in anti-colonial movements in various parts of the world led to the concept of “gendered nationalism” whereby nation is signified as mother and its male citizen as the savior or protector of the “motherland” (Mayer; McClintock, qtd. in Banerjee 6). Consequently, the view that woman is to be seen as the preserver of the tradition and producer of the valiant male citizen got normalized in the discourse of nationalism. It is against this background that this paper aims to read *Letters of 1971 (Ekattorer Chithi)* – a collection of letters written during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 by the freedom fighters – as an endeavor to the historic legacy of reclaiming Bengali masculinity. *Letters of 1971* unraveling the gallantry of the freedom fighters, and their decision of embracing martyrdom over defeat, engages a glaring instance of a counter-narrative of the colonial discourse of Bengali masculinity. Alongside, the narratives of *Letters of 1971* will be seen, in this paper as participating in the discourse of gendering nationalism through its projection of the nation as mother who is in dire need of action from its valiant sons.

Keywords: masculinity, gendered nationalism, hegemonic discourse, Liberation War of 1971

Introduction

Maa Go Bhabna Keno? (Why Fear, Mother?)
O mother, why do you fear?
We are your peace-loving sons
But we hold weapons against the enemies
When in need
We know how to protest, mother
So don't be afraid
We won't fall, we won't fail



This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

We won't lose a grain of your soil
We know how to build a fortress using our very own ribs
We know how to protest, mother
So don't be afraid
We will not be affronted
We won't retreat like cowards
We know how to strike like lightning from the sky
We know how to protest, mother
So don't be afraid
We won't accept defeat
We won't live in weakness
We will smile and embrace death, when in need
We know how to protest
So don't be afraid.

“Maa Go Bhabna Keno?” (Why Fear, Mother?), a 1961 song composed by Gauriprassanna Majumdar and sung by Hemanta Mukhopadhyay, filled with patriotic fervor, became one of the few songs that kept inspiring the Bangalee freedom fighters during the 1971 Liberation War. The song is representative of the negation of the age-old hegemonic masculinity which was made normative masculinity established in colonial discourse through its continual reaffirmation of their resolve to protest, take risks, and be uncompromising. It is pertinent to the present discussion in two ways: one, that it can be read against the stereotypical projection of the fragility and weakness of Bengali males. In other words, it provides us a glimpse into the Bangalee masculinity that is quite contrary to the hegemonic masculinity of colonial discourse and its repeated emphasis on the resolution to safeguard against any impending doom on their mother/nation invites us to a world of gendered nationalism and its resultant implications for the female citizen. Drawing instances from *Ekattorer Chithi* (hereafter *Letters of 1971*) – a collection of letters written (in Bangla) and exchanged between the freedom fighters of the Liberation War of 1971, the present paper aims to map the development the Bangalee male subjectivity – a subversion of the stereotypical construction of Bengali masculinity as the Other of the manly white British, a corollary of colonial enterprise – through their valor and resolve to fight against their enemies and sacrifice their lives for freedom. Against the age-old projection of the Bengali male as effeminate, compliant, and physically feeble, as noted by scholars (Chowdhury 4), this paper posits that the 1971 freedom movement proved itself as a crucial site for the Bangalee freedom fighters to produce a counter-narrative to the oft-quoted “weakness and effeminacy” of the Bengali male whereby we get an alternative projection of Bangalee manhood (Bannerjee 29; Chowdhury 4; Ray 21). Also, this collection can be seen as participating in the already established discourse of gendered nationalism through its display of the trope of nation as mother figure and the responsibility of protecting the security and honor of the nation conferred on its male citizen (Bannerjee 6).

Rationale and Methodology

Most scholarship on South Asian studies concentrating on postcolonialism, nationalism,

and the concept of masculinity preoccupy themselves with Hindu nationalism and masculinity, and the intersection of anti-colonial movements, nationalism, and Hindu masculinity; and any discussion on Bengali masculinity arose as a corollary of the Hindu nationalist movement and the resultant 1947 Partition context. Also, in any discussion revolving around the term “Bengali masculinity” in a pre-Partition context, is a hazy one – in a sense, a monolithic term that cannot sufficiently capture the experience of the males of the newly independent Bangladesh – as it indicates an undivided Bengal and thus cannot be applied to the post-1971 Bangladeshi context. Chattopadhyay admits the complexity in discussing the term “Bengali male” as it refers to an ethnic and linguistic identity on the one hand and a national identity on the other (271). So, henceforth in the present paper, the term Bangalee masculinity will be used to refer to the nuances of the pre-Partition and post-independence context as reflected in *Letters of 1971*. However, it should not be taken for granted that the term “Bangalee masculinity” indicates a hegemonic, monolithic category. Moreover, there is not much scholarship on Bangalee masculinity in the post-1971 context, especially its imbrication in the project of the 1971 Liberation Movement, Bangalee nationalist venture. In order to clarify its different trajectory I use Bengali in the discussion revolving around colonial discourse while I use Bangalee to denote the experience revolving around the 1971 context. Any critique of the intersection of Bengali nationalism and Bengali masculine subjectivity in the lore of gendered nationalism – situating it in every day socio-political experiences – is, except for Bina D. Costa (416), very few and far between. The present paper, taking the letters written by the freedom fighters of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 as the starting point, purports to enter into the imbrication of Bangalee masculinity in the nationalist struggle and the subsequent shaping of gendered nationalism. The reason for choosing *Letters of 1971* as our point of departure is that these letters were originally composed by the freedom fighters to communicate with their near and dear ones. It gives us an unmediated picture of their ideological states. Not only that, the views of the fighters from all walks of life – across religious and economic backgrounds – assembled here might open up a multifarious perspective instead of a monolithic picture of the Bangalee male point of view. It should also be mentioned here that the present paper, given the limited research span, does not intend to provide a complete genealogy of Bangalee masculinity in the post-1971 context, but aims to draw attention to the existing lack of scholarship on the subject and to the wider scope in future studies on Bangalee masculinity. This paper employs a descriptive approach and textual analysis to explore the debates surrounding the concept of Bangalee masculinity and the manifestation of a contested picture of the negative stereotypes of previous eras.

Literature Review

The concept of Bengali masculinity is already a widely discussed topic in postcolonial and gender studies as well as in South Asian studies. Any discussion on Bengali masculinity by scholars immediately brings forth the discussion of politics of colonial masculinity. Attempts to relate the discourse of Bengali masculinity to the imperial context have been done by scholars whereby they showed the negative implications of such discourse on the colonial Bengali Hindu male psychology and self-perception. In order to defend

the colonial administrative politics of mobilizing Bengali male identities as “weak and effeminate,” Bengali males, as has been shown by different scholars (Chattopadhyay 271; Banerjee 29; Ray 21; Sinha 11), were excavating more masculine images of themselves from their past, constantly busy in self-ridicule for accepting such images, and mobilizing a positive self-image through their active participation in different social reform and anti-colonial movements. According to Chattopadhyay, along with emphasizing on physical strength, or *bahubal*, they were also looking for *buddhibal*, wisdom or intelligence, cultivated mostly by the emerging educated Hindu middle class (275). The early and late nineteenth century colonial India witnessed recurrent debates surrounding the discourse of Bengali masculinity constructed and contested by the colonial and colonized respectively. While many instances show that Bengali males were constructing and performing a more positive self-image in their everyday experience, there lingered, on the flip side, the legacy of negative stereotypes of colonial administrative policy in the post-colonized psyche. In her book *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and “The Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Mrinalini Sinha explores the politics of colonial masculinity which, instead of giving a monolithic picture of English masculinity versus Bengali effeminacy, gives a complex portrayal of phenomenon employing a historical materialist approach. Sinha is of the opinion that the framework of discrete “National” cultures as a tool cannot sufficiently explain the development of these categories and their subsequent manipulation in the imperial project (7). She warns against any criticism of racial politics that “eschew an integrated political, economic and cultural analysis” and restrains herself from treating the categories “manly Englishman” and “effeminate Bengali” as something pre-given, of a “fixed” category, rather situating these two categories in the context of four specific historic incidents in the late nineteenth century colonial India to unearth a complex genealogy between them – the Ilbert Bill of 1883, official response to Native Volunteer Movement in 1885, recommendations of the public service commission in 1886, and the Indian opposition to the Age of Consent Bill in 1891 (15). In doing this, she connects the issues of gender, imperial rule, and British domestic and cultural history to that of the development of colonial masculinity. Here, Sinha, using the framework of colonial masculinity, ventures into exposing the complex dynamics of power relations exposing the intricacies at the intersections of class, gender, religion, sexuality, and ethnic origin of both the colonizer and the colonized (11). Through picking up the above-mentioned “specific practices of ruling,” she shows that the development of the categories – the colonized and the colonizer – were not something “self-evident” (1). They were informed of and influenced by “imperial social relations” (2). While Ashis Nandy’s *The Intimate Enemy* (qtd. in Sinha 7) shows the birth of a stereotypical treatment of Bengali masculinity as a direct impact – mostly as a unilateral one – of the post-Enlightenment notion of “Western” masculinity and the colonial domination, Sinha’s analysis here exposes how these two categories reinforced and influenced each other. Instead of seeing the emergence of the stereotypical mislabeling of Bengali educated middle class as “effeminate babu” as the development of a unilateral impact of imperialism – a corollary of the image of British metropolitan masculine ethos – as Nandy (qtd. in Sinha 7) does, Sinha sees the concept imbricated in the “various intersecting ideologies of race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality” that played a substantial

role in shaping the social and cultural developments in the United Kingdom as well as its national characteristics – especially its notion and representation of “English” masculinity (11). Thus, through her projection, the fact that British masculinity was also implicated in the history of British Imperialism also comes to the fore. How, in various phases of historic incidents, British masculinity experienced a transition – the notion of manliness from “godliness and good learning” to “vigorous muscular Christianity” – mostly influenced by the prioritization of the imperial recruiting agencies, is explored in Sinha’s study (9). In brief, Sinha’s analysis does not lose sight of the counter flows to colonial metropolis of the influence of the policies and the ideas. She, quite contrary to Said’s (qtd. in Sinha 12) treatment of the West as a monolithic entity, always a pre-given or fixed category, sees both the West and the East as always evolving through the influence of the political, economic, and ideological policies of both the colonies and its center. Added to this was the stake of the Bengali elites’ investment in, and contestation of, the concept for their own purpose (21). Sinha aptly chose the happenings of the late nineteenth century as a vantage point of her study as the aftermath of the Great Revolt of 1857 witnessed a radical restructuring of the administrative policies of the British colonial authority. Consequently, colonial race relations experienced significant changes and was rearticulated constantly to meet the demand of the changed material conditions (14). In these various changing historic circumstances, the notion of Bengali masculinity also had similar ups and downs. Sinha develops an in-depth genealogy of the notion. During the early days of colonial rule, the inhabitants of Bengal were broadly generalized as “mild-mannered and effete in nature,” “of weaker frame and enervated character” (Orme, qtd. in Sinha 15). Macaulay’s description of Bangalees is as follows:

Whatever the Bengali does he does languidly. His favourite pursuits are sedentary. He shrinks from bodily exertion; and though voluble in dispute, and singularly pertinacious in the war of chicane, he seldom engages in personal conflict, and scarcely ever enlists as a soldier. There never perhaps existed a people so thoroughly fitted by habit for a foreign yoke. (qtd. in Sinha 15)

This excerpt not only holds a sweeping generalization of the negative stereotype of Bengali masculinity that keeps haunting the imagination and the self-perception of the Bengalis but also a justification for their age-old subordination to the various foreign rulers, such as the British. Sinha observes that this negative attitude of Macaulay’s had a far-flung impact on the popular imagination regarding the Bengali masculine image and this attitude got concretized in late nineteenth century colonial India, especially at the hands of the then ruling authority for further manipulation and preservation of racial exclusivity (16). She also shows how the notion that was used as a sweeping category implies that all manipulated natives of Bengal were associated with the Bengali middle class, leaving the majority of the Bengalis, “the laboring classes and certain low-caste groups,” outside the notion (16). To quote Sinha:

Over time, effeminacy had evolved from a loosely defined attribute associated with the entire population of Bengal, and sometimes by extension of all of India, to

an attribute associated very specifically with Western-educated Indians, a large majority of whom were Bengali Hindus. On the one hand, the concept of Bengali effeminacy had been narrowed to refer quite specifically to this group of babus. On the other hand, the concept of Bengali effeminacy was also greatly expanded to include the politically discontented middle-class “natives” from all over India. (16)

This expresses the gradual teleological development and expansion of the term “effeminate Bengali” and its further manipulation for political purpose. While in the beginning this term would refer to the male inhabitants of Bengal, with the passage of years it served two purposes for the ruling class. It, as Sinha observes, not only came to be used to refer to the Western-educated Bengali Hindus, typically referred to as babu, but also for criminalizing the politically active middle-class Indians with such negatively stereotyping terminologies (16-17). Understandably, along with being manipulated for the tactical contrivance of racial segregation, this served, for the alarmed British colonial authority in India, as a mechanism for taunting the educationally and politically aspiring Bengali middle class who were beginning to claim a stronghold in policy planning and self-ruling in the late nineteenth century (17). Hence, this notion of Bengali masculinity experienced such alternating treatments at the hands of the British rulers. It calls for our attention to the nuances of the gradual transformation of the notion of effeminacy and its usage for political and cultural manipulation. Alongside, equal attention is to be paid to the intersections of class, gender, religion, and ethnic origin in the development and sustenance of such notions.

In *Make Me a Man!* Banerjee postulates on the formation of “Indian men” as “effeminate other” and relates it to the colonial enterprise (2). Her detailed analysis of fictional and non-fictional accounts, official memos, published histories, religious pamphlets, and autobiographical accounts yields a multifaceted and shifting interpretation of masculinity. For doing this, she develops the genealogy of “hegemonic masculinity,” which “sets the standards for male demeanour, thinking and action” (Nagel, qtd. in Banerjee 7), and used by the colonial authority as a lens to cast a Eurocentric “gaze” on its colonized other. Her proposition, however, does not assume that before the colonial enterprise, the concept of masculinity did not exist in the Indian subcontinent. Notwithstanding its prior existence in the public imagination, Banerjee establishes a valid connection between the hegemonic masculinity and the Indian Hindu masculinity, as a corollary of colonial venture in the Indian subcontinent. Colonial officers, who were already fed into the ideology of Christian manhood, themselves being the concrete demonstration of their masculine prowess, started using their framework of masculinity in judging the Indian males (27). Through this process, Indian males were sorted under a “martial and non-martial” dichotomy and got concretized (MacMunn, qtd. in Banerjee 28). Among various races, Bengalis were seen as “the archetypal effeminate figure, hardly masculine” (26). Banerjee sees a strong connection between “hegemonic” or “normative” masculinity and the so-called “civilizing mission” of the British colonial enterprise (22). In order to validate the colonizing venture, it was imperative for them to establish the colonized subjects with a certain lack. The discourse of masculinity proved to be a fruitful site to be incorporated into it. Instead

of treating the concept of masculinity as something pre-given, she preferred to see it as a “historically, politically and culturally” constituted phenomenon (7). She situates the emergence of masculine Hinduism/nationalist politics to the happenings of nineteenth and early twentieth century in the background of the interaction between the British and Indian elite. Presumably, as Banerjee affirms, “Christian manliness” – a British colonial import in colonized India – comprising values like “martial prowess, muscular strength, rationality and individualism” – exerted substantial pressure among Indian males (23). Manliness, as Hooper puts it, is roughly associated with “physical strength, toughness, capacity for violence” (qtd. in Banerjee 47). As many scholars in this arena have shown, Bangalee males were seen as a “potent symbol of effeminacy” (26). One possible reason, reiterated by many previous studies, that often comes to the fore on this discourse is the many years of subjugation of the Bangalees. This long-term subjugation made them “not muscular, not aggressive, and not skilled in militarism” (22). However, it should not be assumed that Banerjee sees the colonized Indian male as the passive recipient of the hegemonic masculinity. Rather, Banerjee sees the institutionalization of the colonial masculinity as a site of contestation between the colonial officers and the colonized males (8). While the prime focus of her discussion is genealogy of Hindu masculinity, she puts forth, incorporating the framework of gendered nationalism, the references of the Nationalist resistances of the other colonized territories like Ireland, Palestine, Australia and Serbia (8-10). That site, along with being a site of contestation, provides a counter picture of the discourse of masculinity demonstrated by the colonized males. Irrespective of their spatial differences, all nationalist resistance movements share the same lot in capitalizing the “hegemonic masculinity” for serving their own purposes. For this, as Banerjee (12) puts forth, the Bangalees “drew on their own cultural memories and vocabularies of militarism” in order to recuperate their manly self-image. In this case, most relevant instances would be the attempts of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Vivekananda in recuperating a manly self-image for the Bengali males by digging deep into their mythic past and orienting the Bengali males with their distinct manly image, ridiculing the fellow Bengali males for being inert in saving their motherland from foreign rule (45). More or less in all movements the “motherland or nation” was projected as woman “to be protected by the brave citizen warriors” and this worked as “a common metaphor for nationalism” (12). Banerjee’s study opens up a new lacuna in the discourse of masculinity as it relates the concept with a nationalist resistance movement situating the concept of masculinity in a particular socio-political and cultural context. It is indeed a wonderful addition to studies on masculinity as in talking about Hindu masculinity. She establishes the connection among the wider colonized territories through the nationalist resistance struggles, renders visible the ways “hegemonic masculinity” was appropriated by the colonized males which was used once as justifying their subjugated position and as a medium of colonial “gaze” (10). However, instead of seeing the impact of colonial discourse as a specific historic teleological phenomenon, which interacted with the already existent concept of manhood, her analysis reinstates the stronghold of colonial masculinity in the subsequent development of Hindu masculinity with which most previous scholarly studies on the subject are preoccupied. Also, this study sheds little light on the pan-Indian

masculinity which also had interacted with colonial masculinity.

Saayan Chattapadhyay's research on Bengali masculinity provides a renewed lens to understand the concept and its development. While numerous studies on Bengali masculinity, as has been stated by Chattapadhyay, revolves around "physical strength, courage and virility of the Bengali male" which have been informed by the hegemonic colonial discourse on negative stereotype Bengali male identity, his main focus is the tendency prevalent in nineteenth century discourse of recuperating a "more masculine" Bengali male by diving deep into mythic historic stock (265). While a colonial definition of masculinity attached much importance to *bahubal*, Chattapadhyay shows *buddhibal* emerged as a counter-definition of Bengali masculinity adorned by the emerging nationalist discourse (275). Chattopadhyay also talks about the emergence of the Bengali bhadralok masculinity discourse, arising out of the "compensatory" image of Bangalee masculinity – purported to counteract the negative stereotype at that time – basing and organizing his discussion on three distinct trajectories: Self-ridicule, Recuperation of the manly past, and Emergence of urban middle class bhadralok (274).

Theoretical Framework

Chandrima Chakraborty, in an introduction to a compilation on South Asian men and masculinities, builds on the development of masculinity, relating it to different political crises. She considers that different historical events, by making masculinities "visible," provide a lacuna through which we can better understand the concept of masculinity because political crises bring forth the nuances in the concept of masculinity and help to question its "naturalisation," and provide a complex understanding of "everyday/normal practices and experiences of 'being a man'" (411). Her conceptualization of crises is very interesting – incorporating a historical materialist approach – as she situates certain political crises in the interplay of class, gender, and ethnic relations (411). Instead of seeing masculinity as something given, or fixed attributes, she sees it as something evolving around different critical moments, in everyday practice and experiences, and looks for the ways masculine behavior is manifested during different crises by calling forth "manly" men to handle the situation and thus building a demarcation between "manly" and "weak" (411). This sort of analysis, that uses the framework of political crises like "colonialism, anti-colonial movement, state formations, civil wars, religious conflicts and migration" (Chakraborty 411), is particularly relevant to the present paper as it is based on the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh context. Also, like the previous scholarships on masculinity, she does not relate the concept of masculinity to British colonialism. Her analysis can be used as a framework for understanding the Bangalee freedom fighters' experiences of "being a man" during 1971, their conformity toward masculine norms during crises, and the feelings of anger and inadequacy in their inability to exhibit fortitude or bravado. Most importantly, Chakraborty's stance on the interrelation between moment of political crisis and the concept of masculinity – political crisis shaped and informed by the existing discourse of masculinity – can be a guide in shedding light on the Bangalee males' subversion of the age-old negative image of being "effeminate and weak" and the role of 1971 war in conceptualizing their male subjectivity (412).

R. W. Connell, in his analysis of the concept of masculinities, following Wetherell and Edler, is of the opinion that men do not exhibit a fixed masculine character trait, “[r]ather, they make simultaneously specific choices from a cultural repertoire of masculine behavior” (xviii). Actually, in conceptualizing the construction and enactment of masculinity, Connell supports Wetherell and Edler’s discursive psychology which studies a masculine behavior in a particular situation (xx). However, he finds the framework inadequate in conceptualizing different forms of masculinities in different social groups like ethnic communities, regions or social classes, in situating it within wider social realities like economic inequality, state power, and global conflict, and forming a broad generalization about masculinities (xix). For him, the model of gender practices provides a ground to study the concept of masculinity as to him “masculinities are configurations of practice structured by gender relations” (44). Also, Connell’s study on masculinity emphasizes the need for an intersectional approach in situating the phenomenon at the intersection of class, race and gender, region and religion. So, in understanding the Bangalee freedom fighters’ pattern of masculine behavior, Connell’s framework of gender practice in a given situation will particularly be important here. In addition to this, his hegemonic masculinity – “a currently accepted strategy, a historically mobile relation” (38-37) which he formulates as not automatic and open to disruption – proves helpful in understanding the predominance of a particular masculine behavior in a given time, like prevalence of martial character types in an imperial context in times of political crises. An important point on masculinity is that, as Connell states, “it does not exist except in contrast with femininity” (54).

Also, the freedom fighters’ preoccupation with their sense of shame and dishonor at the thought of inactivity and leisure in a time of crisis could be explained through Sara Ahmed’s conceptualization of the politics of shame and her contention that “emotions accumulate over time, as a form of affective value” (11, 103). Her emphasis on the production of the emotion, especially its “history of the production and circulation,” its subsequent emergence as social norms and its performativity, and her utilization of Butler’s concept of the “effect of repetition,” often through “speech acts” in materializing the world, is particularly relevant here (11, 12). Following Ahmed’s conceptualization of emotions as cultural politics, the freedom fighters’ sense of shame on passivity can be understood as not something pre-given, as being already over there. Rather it is the effect of the repetition of the notion that not being able to meet the standard of ideal masculine behavior is a matter of shame, which have been reinforced through the gendered nationalist discourses in the colonial and postcolonial Indian context whereby preserving the honor of the motherland was associated with prerogatives of male citizens. Also Ahmed’s contention that emotion becomes a means through which past sticks “to the surface of the bodies” becomes meaningful here in exposing the established masculine norms of the past and its recurrence in the present, through the freedom fighters’ sense of shame (202). The freedom fighters’ investment in avoiding the sense of shame also opens up their path for reintegration into the normative masculine self.

To conceptualize the freedom fighters’ constant identification of the motherland with the mother figure, the concept of gendered nationalism proves to be a helpful model.

Country in nationalist discourses, as Sarker puts forth while speaking about Hindu nationalist ideologies, does not refer to “a piece of land,” an abode of real people, but rather is conceptualized as the “Mother Goddess,” and the people of it as “the sons of the mother” (2011). Women are seen “as a national symbol ... the guardian of continuity and immutability of the nation, the embodiment of its respectability” (Mosse, qtd. in Ray 5). Samita Sen, in her analysis of social reform movements of nineteenth century Bengal, provides a linkage between gender and nationalism, like the “identification of women with a culturally and morally invested domestic domain” (231). In this process women were seen as the “repository of tradition” (Sen 231) and “national honor ... any act (e.g., rape) that defiles and violates their bodies becomes a political weapon aimed at destroying the enemy nation’s honor” (Banerjee 13). Also prevalent is the tendency to look upon the “motherland or nation as women to be protected by brave citizen warriors” (Banerjee 12).

Manifestations of Bangalee Masculinity in *Letters of 1971*

Letters of 1971, a collection of letters written during the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh by the freedom fighters, was published in Bangla jointly by *Daily Prothom Alo* and Grameen Phone in 2009. This collection provides a glimpse into the context of the fighters’ decision to join the war, their daily experiences of war and brave tactics, sometimes the depiction of gruesome experiences, concern for their family members. It is seen that the writers whose letters are chosen in this collection cover a wide age-range and profession – East Pakistani regiment members, professionals, and sometimes even students. Recipients of the letters were mostly parents, wives and children, siblings, relatives, and sometimes, fellow fighters and commanding officers. While these letters were primarily the medium for informing of the whereabouts of the fighters and family members, they become a great source for understanding the psyche of those male Bangalee fighters – exposing their reasons for joining the war, their tackling of emotional longings for their loved ones, and the popular nationalist discourse. A close reading of the collection of letters opens up a vista of the Bangalee male psyche fighting for their motherland at the cost of their lives. Hereafter, in this paper, we will be looking into the letters in light of the workings the legacy of hegemonic colonial masculinity, and its construction and contestation, and its performativity in the 1971 context. As Chakraborty puts it, any sort of political crisis becomes a site to expose the everyday masculine norms, and, taking 1971 as such, we can get a glimpse into the situations and processes of how masculine expectations of risk taking and responsibility were negotiated and met by the fighters (411). We find a continuation of the discourses of nationalist resistance movements in colonial India whereby the prominent intellectuals were “appropriating,” contesting and mobilizing the attributes like “valorization of martial prowess, physical strength and the unwillingness to compromise” in these letters too (Bannerjee 12).

Several epithets before the word Bangalee like “valiant” or Bir were mobilized and used profusely, as in “Bir Bangalee ostro dhoro, Bangladesh swadhin koro” (Valiant Bangalees, take up arms, make Bangladesh independent). Here, the Bangalee male fighters were termed as valiant or Bir to encourage their participation in fighting the enemies and contribute in subsequent nation building. Like the reiteration found in the song “Maa go

bhabna keno?” (Why fear, Mother?), presented in the introduction, of vowing to protect and not yield to the enemy, we find the same resolution undercuts the theme of every letter in this collection. Each writer, more or less, expresses their intention to take risks to save the honor of their motherland. For textual analysis, the theme of these letters will be considered on two different trajectories: desire to take risks and responsibility, and the handling of emotional anxieties and the unwillingness to compromise.

The young fighters, as seen in the letters, are afflicted by guilt for not being able to take prompt decisions to set out for training, but now the threat of death cannot dampen their fervor for taking risks and contributing to nation building. The much-expected male role that society demands from its male citizens during any crisis is risk taking. Naturally, all the letters assembled here are the blatant examples of the inclination towards risk taking. Zinnat Ali Khan, a navy commander, expresses his resolve on risk taking thus: “If my blood is to be shed to save your honor, then history will testify that Bangalees did not hesitate to lay bare their lives in front of bullets” (Ahmed et al. 15). Abdur Rahim, lying in hospital with the ravages of splinters, writes about his fugitive life (54-56). Abu Bakkar Siddik alias Dudu Miah reiterates in a similar vein that he “prefers a hero’s death to that of a coward” (44-45). Firdous Kamal Uddin, in a letter to his mother, marvels at his own transformation from a frightened person to fighter (57). Abdur Rouf alias Bobin’s letter shows that he is not afraid of passing the night in the midst of threats of bullets, shells, and mortars as he recalls his faint-hearted character from childhood (36). A timid boy, afraid of going out unaccompanied, is now valiantly holding a rifle and passing nights in bunkers, chasing enemies. Bobin marvels at his own emotive transformation. His letter, a mixture of emotive recounts and resolutions, renders a unique picture of the Bangalee male psyche. Here, we see how emotional anxieties are handled maturely according to the reality of their situation. Against the reading of the Bangalee male as timid and “chicken-hearted,” the letters – despite their youthful ebullience and romantic emotional note – contain a calm and restrained approach to the turbulent situation (Schanberg). Kazi Nurunnabi, a final year medical student, despite witnessing the gruesome death of 250 members of the then East-Pakistani police force in Rajshahi city, reassures his mother, saying, “while mass people are being killed indiscriminately, being alive is a dishonor” (Ahmed et al. 13). Nurunnabi’s reaction is of a fighter in complete control of his situation. Written or posted on March 29, 1971, this letter gives a snapshot of the turmoil in Rajshahi when, attacked by the Pakistani Military, the city suffers casualties of 250 lives and is emptied of its inhabitants (13). Most importantly, his entreating to his mother not to worry for him at that moment directs us to a completely different projection of the Bangalee male in colonial rhetoric. Having witnessed the deaths of the common people, his conscience pricks him for being saved and he feels shame. Here, Sara Ahmed’s concept of “the politics of shame” is also particularly relevant (103). The age old projection of the ideal masculine self – through the contestation of the colonial discourse of the Bangalee masculine image and counter-projection of an ideal Bangalee image – and its promise of the demonstration of risk taking, preservation of the intact interiority and the negation of the emotional bent of mind, as it denotes its proximity to femininity set a sort of standard for its fellow

masculine subject. Following Ahmed's contention that the gap between the ideal ego and the ego, and its resultant shame of not living up to the standard, gives birth to a desire to the reformation of the self (106), it can be surmised here that in case of Nurunnabi (Ahmed et al. 13), the gap between ideal masculine self and the real self creates a sort of anxiety and shame in his masculine self. Through the age old colonial rhetoric, an ideal masculine figure was established and made normative in the Bangalee psyche, especially glorifying its heroism and risk taking, and negating passivity and its emotional fervor. And any failure to meet this standard of the masculine subject led to a sense of shame for the Bangalee males. That is why he, like any other Bangalee male, considers it a shame to be passive and not do anything for his country, to escape from the war zone and stay safe. His depiction is rendered in an unwavering tone, his indifference towards the loss of control over the city and his patient watch over the next opportunity to attack is one of the masculine roles of risk taking and emotional restraint of a fighter. Hence, Nurunnabi's letter significantly contributes to an alternative image of the colonial Bangalee image. A similar sense of reverence for military prowess and the responsibility of safeguarding the nation, the mother and her honor – a mostly celebrated masculine trait established by the societal norms and colonial rhetoric – is noted in the letter of Navy Commando Zinnat A. Khan (Ahmed et al. 15). It glorifies heroic death – sacrificing lives for the noble cause of protecting the honor of the motherland. As military personnel, he considers leaving an example for the upcoming generation of a valiant Bangalee masculine self who never hesitates to lay bare his chest to the bullet. Akhlaqul Hossain Ahmed, another fighter, is very practical in his approach. He shows no emotional fervor in the tone of his letter written to his wife (27). A similar emotional restraint is displayed in the letter of freedom fighter Rumi, evidenced through his youthful enthusiasm for taking revenge, his bent on avenging the “unparalleled savagery” of the Pakistani military, in his demonstration of professional military prowess and tactics (25).

A theme that runs through all the letters is the predilection, which can be best explained by the framework of gendered nationalism, that being a male son of the land it was incumbent on them to protect the honor of their mother, or nation. An attack on the land, in nationalist discourse, is symbolized as the attack or dishonor of the tradition, or of the women folk (Banerjee 12). Again, a society expects certain valorous initiatives from a male figure during any sort of crisis; failure to do so raises questions about the masculinity of that male member of the society. For the most part, all the fighters, as the letters exhibit, express a similar concern about the nation, its women folk, under threat from its enemies, and thus, it is beyond a masculine norm to sit idle instead of actively participating in the war. Freedom fighter A.B.M. Mahbubur Rahman writes from an Indian training camp with a sense of guilt for not informing his mother of his whereabouts (Ahmed et al. 14). His resolve to take revenge becomes a wonderful manifestation of the gendered nationalist venture, most particularly, when he says, “The day I take revenge for the dishonor of my mother and sister, and make my Golden Bengal free of its enemies, only then will I return to your arms” (14). Also, the tendency to self-question and reproach themselves for not participating in the idealized masculine behavior can be explained through Ahmed's stance

on the “cultural politics of shame” whereby a subject or self finds itself being lacking in not meeting up the idealized normative behaviors of an ideal masculine self (106). In all the letters, the fighters apprehend a sense of shame in their failure to do something for the motherland in a time of crisis, to stand up against the dishonor of its womenfolk. This sense of shame also opens up, as Ahmed puts it, a process of reintegration for the masculine self which leads to a self-recognition of the failure to “live up to a social ideal” (106). Alongside being an individual consciousness, the nature of shame that the freedom fighters exhibit here is also of a “collective shame” (Ahmed 103) as it results from their allegiance to their motherland. The embodied consciousness of the male citizen, particularly the embodied awareness of the motherland and its vilification of the bodily honor – the visceral dishonor of the female citizen – incites a sort of shame resulting from the failure to stand up against such trampling. In this case, Zinnat Ali Khan says that “[t]o save my Bengal Mother, the land upon which you gave me birth, the language that you taught me, and the motherland, many Zinnats like me have to sacrifice their lives” (Ahmed et al. 15). Abdullahil Baki alias Saju affirms he cannot but join the war (18). This is the least he can do for his country. Khurshed Alom assures that, “Your son is going to avenge the death of your sons.” The letter concludes with a strong affirmation, “While your sons’ honor is at stake, we, your sons, can’t remain silent and do nothing” (19). Amanullah C. Faruk conveys his remorse for his delay in joining the training, his conscience constantly nagging him for the failure to join the war (21). All the above mentioned letters, with their striking similarity in demonstrating a normative picture, centers around the notion that male citizens are invested with the responsibility of ensuring and safeguarding the honor of the family, or the nation. Motherland, the mother as passive recipient of the valorous sons’ protection, is completely dependent on her sons. Here the responsibility is of a collective one. While these letters exhibit the negation of the sense of shame, it also becomes an occasion for the hetero-patriarchal valorization of the long-established norms, where female citizens are led to secondary position.

Here, we come across a contrary picture from the discourse of colonial prejudices against Bangalee masculinity – their aversion to physical activity and military rule. One of the editors of the book, Rashid Haider takes on the prevalent negative stereotypes of the inherent weakness of Bangalee males to show his pride in the fact that the Bangalees, through their participation in the Mukti Bahini (Freedom Fighters) and their valiant embrace of death, proved the opposite (Ahmed et al. 1).

It should be noted here that in their reaction to the particular political crisis in 1971 and their participation and enactment of masculine norms, the Bangalee males are not exhibiting any monolithic image. Rather *Letters of 1971* exhibits a multifarious dimension of masculine subjects. For example, the younger fighters, mostly students, have a different sense and demonstration of the masculine behaviors and responsibilities – a passionate embarking on the war, an avid desire to serve the cause of the nation, an ardor for bearing the role of the male citizen, saving the honor of the womenfolk – than that of the older fighters and elderly men who regarded themselves as fated to serve for the cause of the country, a moral or ethical responsibility. Most of the young fighters’ notes abound with

the instances of the pangs of their conscience for dawdling in taking the decisions to set out for camp training, reiteration of the necessity to save the honor of the country, a call for fulfilling the responsibility of the male child, putting aside all other worldly concerns. The married ones reflect their anxieties for their family and emotional longing for their spouses, while simultaneously displaying a paternal attitude towards their wives. Freedom fighter Golam Rahman, in his letter addressed to his wife, exhibits a complete surrender to divine providence, a patronizing attitude, a stoic indifference to life and death, and pragmatic advice to his wife (Ahmed et al. 31). Interestingly though, this letter provides a different reading of the hegemonic masculinities prescribed as a sort of normative standard of masculinities. The writer, despite passing his days amid war, expresses emotions for the domestic domain where his wife and children are. He does not show any ardent desire for heroic sacrifice for the cause of the nation. However, it would be unfair to presume that they had any less ardor in serving their nation. Ataur Rahman Khan Kayser, in a letter addressed to his daughter, expresses his emotions for not being able to stay beside his daughter and reasoned, almost with an ethical and moral bent of mind, that he needs to fight for the masses right now (39). The notes of the elderly fighters, though not brimming with the zeal and intensity of the younger, student fighters and the emotional exuberance displayed in married fighters, do contain a moral urgency in fighting for the nation. Nazmul Huda's note, describing an operation, is a glaring example of military prowess and bravery (49). Although he admits that physical and mental tiredness induce him to take respite from everything, his conscience does not let him do so. Patuary Naseruddin Noyon, most emotional of all, starting with an emotive note and romantic predilection, consoles and advises his expecting wife (41). However, there is no wavering or faltering in the resolution to fight for a peaceful and harmonious home for his progeny. This interpretation also provides a lacuna to the hetero-patriarchal normativity in the letters whereby male inhabitants occupy a valorized positionality in the society, in their power of preserving the honor of the motherland, the only valid safeguard of the nation.

So, their notes do not exhibit hegemonic masculine traits and characteristics from which a list of masculine behaviors can be prepared or prescribed. Rather, following Connell's proposition that masculinity can better be understood as a situated phenomenon – not something inherited or given – it can be articulated here that depending on the demand of particular situations, Bangalee males of various ages do not exhibit a monolithic character trait. On the contrary, there is a manifestation of complex character traits (xix). Notwithstanding, a subversion of colonial masculinity is a predominant motif that runs through all the letters. While we have seen in our discussion on colonial discourse that Bangalees were stereotypically known for their aversion towards physical activities and risk taking, the letters exhibit a different picture of Bangalee masculine attributes of risk taking in their participation in training and in confrontation with the enemy armed forces.

Conclusion

In this paper, taking the *Letters of 1971* into consideration, the contour of Bangalee masculinity – quite opposite to the stereotypical projection of Bengali males as “weak and passive” (Chowdhury 4) in the hegemonic colonial masculinity – has been situated in a

particular phenomenon. Instead of exhibiting a typical homogenous male characteristic, abiding by the much-expected social norms of a particular society, we see a rare blend of emotion and risk-taking roles in Bangalee male fighters through their exchanges with fellow fighters and relatives. Their notes abound with emotional longings and fervor for both the motherland and mother. Whereas emotion signifies weakness, their emotions are restrained and directed to the pursuance of a great cause, not a hindrance. This manifestation of Bangalee masculinity can be read as the contestation and subversion of colonial masculinity – physical strength, toughness and capacity for violence – through their unique display of emotion and risk-taking tendencies and unwillingness to compromise. It also calls for a wider prospect in exploring the trajectory of Bangalee masculinity in subsequent years to determine the impacts of globalization and neo-liberal economy.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Salahuddin, et al. eds. *Ekattorer Chithi*. Prothoma Prokashoni, 2009.
- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed., Edinburgh UP, 2014.
- Banerjee, Sikata. *Make Me a Man!: Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India*. State U of New York P, 2005.
- Chakraborty, Chandrima. "Mapping South Asian masculinities: men and political crises." *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2014, pp. 411-420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2014.936211>.
- Chattopadhyay, Saayan. "Bengali Masculinity and the National-Masculine: Some Conjectures for Interpretation" *South Asia Research*, vol. 31, no. 6, 2011, pp. 265-279. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/026272801103100305>.
- Chowdhury, Indira. *The Frail Hero and Virile History: Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal*. Oxford UP, 2001.
- Connell, Raewyn. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed., Polity, 2005.
- D'Costa, Bina. "Birangona: Bearing Witness in War and Peace." *Of the Nation Born: The Bangladesh Papers*, edited by Hameeda Hossain and Amena Mohsin, Zubaan Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2016, pp. 68-112.
- Mayer, Tamar. "Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage." *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, edited by Tamar Mayer, Routledge, 2000, pp. 1-24.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. Routledge, 1995.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Oxford UP, 1988.
- Ray, Sangeeta. *En-gendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives*. Duke UP, 2000.
- Sarker, Tanika. "Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in 19th Century Bengali Literature." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 22, no. 47, 1987, pp. 2011-2015.
- Schanberg, Sydney H. "A Pakistani terms Bengalis Chicken Hearted." *New York Times*, 30 June 1971. http://www.docstrangelove.com/uploads/1971/foreign/19710717_nyt_a_pakistani_terms_bengalis_chicken_hearted.pdf.
- Sen, Samita. "Motherhood and Mothercraft: Gender and Nationalism in Bengal." *Gender & History*, vol. 5 no. 2, 1993, pp. 231-243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.1993.tb00174.x>.
- Sinha, Mrinalini. *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Manchester UP, 1995.