

From Birangona to Barangona: Plight and Tragedy of a War Heroine in *Letters of Blood*

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www.ijrah.com || Vol. 2 No. 5 (2022): September Issue

Date of Submission: 20-08-2022

Date of Acceptance: 10-09-2022

Date of Publication: 21-09-2022

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the relationship between a Birangona, and the men of a patriarchal social system in Rizia Rahman's novel *Rokter Okkhor* (1978), translated into English as *Letters of Blood* (2016) by Arunava Sinha. It also explores the notion of honor as it is awarded to the war heroines and how the notion quickly changes into an idea of stigma as Barangona, which means prostitute. Yasmin, the protagonist of this novel, goes through traumatic experiences of being raped, ravaged, and tormented for a few months during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. After the war of independence, the state honors her as a 'War Heroine' for her sufferings and sacrifices. Looking through the lenses of social stigma and capitalist patriarchy, this paper argues that Yasmin falls doubly victim to the grasp of the patriarchal system and ideology, and her state-awarded "honor" turns into a "stigma"; consequently, she goes through social humiliation, rejection, and violation. Furthermore, this paper also demonstrates that the men deny her the inalienable right to live an everyday life and she is pushed to a tragic journey from a war heroine to be a whore.

Keywords- Birangona; stigma; patriarchy; capitalism; war.

I. INTRODUCTION

Yasmin, the protagonist of Rizia Rahman's novel *Letters of Blood*, goes through traumatic experiences of being raped, ravaged, and tormented for a few months during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. After the war of independence, the state honors her as "Birangona," which means "War Heroine" for her sufferings and sacrifices. Whereas honor makes someone feel very proud about something, the opposite idea—stigma—discredits, reduces, and taints a person. Stigma is "negative feelings that people have about particular circumstances or characteristics that somebody may have." (Hornby, 2011) It is an attribute that can deeply discredit a person. It can also reduce a person by tainting and discounting her. Thus, she becomes an 'other' in society. Herek defines stigma as "the negative regard, inferior status, relative powerlessness that society collectively accords to people who possess a particular characteristic or belong to a particular group or category (Frost, 2011). Women

already bear the 'interior status' and 'relative powerlessness' in a patriarchal society. Stigmatizing them even with honor is common and easy.

Patriarchy, as Kate Millett used the idea in 1970, is the male domination over women in society. According to Millett, the power exercising agencies and instruments of society is completely in the hands of the male. (Millett, 1970) Therefore, in a patriarchal social system, the sacrifices and achievements of the females are not acknowledged. Even women's honor and achievement easily turn into a stigma. Stigmatized women can be easily identified within a society. Consequently, they fall victim to the capitalist patriarchal male members of society, get exploited, oppressed, and suffer tremendously in their hands.

In a patriarchal social system, when honor turns into a stigma for a woman, she falls an easy victim to male authority and goes through pathetic plights; thus, her right to live a free and secure life is violated. By taking into consideration these perspectives and Birangona Yasmin's

tragic life in Rizia Rahman's *Letters of Blood*, this paper demonstrates how Yasmin falls doubly victim to the grasp of the patriarchal system and ideology, and her state-awarded "honor" turns into a "stigma" for her; she becomes a *barangona* which means a prostitute. Consequently, she goes through social humiliation, rejection, and violation. Furthermore, her inalienable right to live a normal life is denied, and she is pushed to a tragic journey from a war heroine to be a whore.

II. LETTERS OF BLOOD IN CONTEXT

In December 1971, East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh after a nine-month war with West Pakistan and its local Bengali collaborators. Rape was common during this conflict. Faced with a huge population of rape survivors, the new Bangladeshi government in December 1971 – six days after the war ended – publicly designated any woman raped in the war as a *birangona* (meaning a brave or courageous woman); the Bangladeshi state uses the term to mean 'war heroine'. (Mookherjee, 2015).

The women who were raped during the war were honored as 'birangona', which means 'heroic women' or 'war heroine.' Independent Bangladesh wanted to pay tribute and establish those women with honor and respect with this honorific in society. The title 'birangona' also acknowledges the sacrifices of the women who were victimized during the war of independence. Though the government tried to rehabilitate them by bringing them into mainstream society, the patriarchal society, with its religious ideologies about gender, honor, and shame, stereotyped the *Birangonas* as abnormal and ashamed. The brave war heroine became almost invisible as they were marginalized and alienated from mainstream society. "The newly formed Bangladeshi government attempted to re-member *birangonas* into families, marriages and the labor market through the rehabilitation project" (Rahman, 2016). However, the attempts were resisted from the root level of the patriarchal Bangladeshi society, which was mainly superstitious and adhered to its (female) gender-unfriendly religious ideologies. Consequently, "many Bengalis did not accept wives or daughters back into the family who had been raped in order to avoid public disgrace" (Brownmiller, 1975).

Birangona as a state honor has psychological, social, and political impacts on the lives of the women who were raped during the war. Fakrul Alam, in the preface of the book *A War Heroine I Speak* writes, "...the lot of women victimized not only by war criminals but also by the unfeeling members of a still patriarchal society, unwilling to give rightful honor where honor is due and preoccupied with false notions of honor." (Ibrahim, 2017) Consequently, the honor became stigma, and the *birangonas* were victimized again. In D'Costa's, reasoning the term *birangona* itself became synonymous with "*barangona*" which means "prostitute," (D'Costa, 2006). Instead of accepting and integrating the women

into mainstream society, they were extremely isolated, made vulnerable to live as woman in society.

Rahman's novel is one of the first works of fiction that criticizes the crass stigmatization of survivors of wartime rape. As *Letters of Blood* makes clear, many such survivors, shunned by family and friends, turned to voluntary prostitution not only out of desperation, but also out of sheer anger and resentment against a social order that failed to constructively address their trauma. (Mohua and Mowtushi, 2019)

Letters of Blood is a novel written by a feminist about women's experiences. Rahman situates Yasmin's experience in a postwar Bangladeshi patriarchal society in the novel. Rahman presents us with the fact that the word *birangona* becomes synonymous with prostitute through the character Yasmin. Yasmin is a well-bred, educated woman from a respectable family. During the military crackdown in Dhaka in 1971, Kamal, a freedom fighter, her brother's friend, takes shelter in their house. Their servant Ali who turns into a local collaborator, informs the Pakistani Army. As a result, a military convoy surrounds their neighborhood. Since they have sheltered a freedom fighter, they are killed instantly except Yasmin. The Pakistani Army abducts her and puts her in their harem. Yasmin goes through the harrowing experiences of being inhumanly tortured, repeatedly raped, and ravaged for six long months. She is utterly devastated when she is freed and discovers herself in a shelter for the violated women. The government of the independent country elevates Yasmin's status as "*birangona*." Her living family members, i.e., her uncle and the entire patriarchal society, take the honor for stigma. After being married, her husband exploits her and forces her into prostitution. Yasmin is getting no means to live everyday life turns into a real prostitute out of desperation. *Golapipatti*, a fictional brothel in Dhaka, becomes her last resort, where she meets her tragic death. She is nothing but victimized by both war and patriarchy.

Rahman sympathizes with the *birangonas* and other women who have taken the brothel as their last resort by depicting the harrowing details of their day-to-day life. In *Letters of Blood*, Rahman portrays the tragedy of being a *birangona* in a society that suppresses and oppresses women, especially those who have suffered and sacrificed a lot during the war of independence. This paper also sets out to evince how the *birangona* are forcibly pushed to meet their tragic ends in so-called civil society's dark alleys.

III. HONOR AND STIGMA OF THE WAR HEROINE

Honor is an excellent reputation, respect, and admiration for someone. It also means a privilege and "an official title, et cetera given to somebody as a reward for something that they have done." (Hornby, 2011) Honor as "an official title" elevates an individual's dignity. In Rahman's *Letters of Blood*, honor as an official title bears

immense significance. Being independent after months-long struggles, the Bangladesh government "honored" the women who were victimized during the war. It was an act of paying respect and admiration for the heroic women for what they did to win independence for the nation. The government aimed to reward them and rehabilitate them in mainstream society. Therefore, "the government ceremoniously elevated each of them to the pedestal of Birangona." (Rahman, 2016) Though birangona is an official title of honor awarded by the government, the ceremonious act of offering the honor victimizes the women again. Because it turns into a social stigma, it becomes explicitly evident in Yasmin's experience. She is humiliated and made a target by the honor:

"They are the ones who had given her a mouthful of a name. She recalls it, Birangona. Heroic women. Concealing the derision in their eyes and the revulsion on their lips behind a mask of pity, they had said, "You are a heroic woman." As though implying, "You're not like other innocent women in society." (Rahman, 2016)

When one is humiliated, hated, and looked down upon for the same reason in society time and again, the reason becomes a stigma for the person. Yasmin, who is supposed to be privileged and respected, becomes stigmatized for her awarded honor. The title meant to elevate her dignity in society strips her of it. And it is acknowledged that

"...[a] person with a stigma, is not quite a human. On this assumption, we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his [or her] life chances." (Goffman, 1963)

Therefore, it becomes difficult for a stigmatized person to live a normal life. Frost asserted that compared to the regular people in society, a stigmatized one's rights, freedoms, and resources are limited; being stereotyped, the stigmatized person suffers from discrimination; therefore, she becomes vulnerable and faces both physical and psychological consequences. Due to her vulnerability, a stigmatized person falls quickly victim to society's evil men and often goes through the same experience that made her stigmatized. (Frost, 2011)

No matter what Yasmin does, Rahman delineates in *Letters of Blood*, she cannot live a regular life. The very word birangona haunts her as it resurfaces her traumatic memories. Her trauma is not addressed. She is not given a chance to heal. Instead, she realizes that the title birangona is a stigma— as a prostitute, it is a brand. Shanti, a prostitute from Golapipatti, reminds her of the fact that "once you're branded, it never comes off." (Rahman, 2016) So the title birangona stereotypes Yasmin, and she suffers for it. She becomes doubly victimized: firstly, during the war of independence by the Pakistani Army, and secondly, by the government and patriarchy. Yasmin thinks the government has made a

terrible mistake by calling them birangona. It actually means "whores" to ordinary people. Even she has to bear the stigma of being a birangona in the most stigmatized place like Golapipatti, where Jahanara, a famous prostitute, remarks that "the Punjabi military raped both her and her reputation." (Rahman, 2016)

Yeasmin is a stigmatized woman — a birangona— even to her uncle. She tries to reason with him on the subject. She tells him that if the freedom fighters did not fight and the woman like her were not victimized, the country's people would not breathe freely in an independent country. However, to her utter shock, she comes to understand that her uncle and relatives would be happy if she were dead. Being a birangona is disrespectful to family and relatives. For this reason, her uncle fears her being a birangona. Her uncle is especially concerned that if people know that his niece is a birangona, he may face difficulties marrying off his two daughters, Rina and Tina. He expresses her inability to take her as an ordinary, respected woman. Out of utter surprise and anguish, Yasmin asks her uncle, "Am I not your brother's daughter? Am I not a woman of this country? Am I a birangona even to you?" (Rahman, 2016)

One of the objectives of the Marxist and Socialist feminist is "to create a world a world in which women can experience themselves as whole persons, as integrated rather than fragmented human being", (Tong, 2014) but due to the social attitudes to her, Yasmin becomes disintegrated even by her family members. Thus, the honor that is meant to elevate her reputation turns into a stigma; wherever she goes, she can read the faces of people who sympathize and pity her instead of showing due honor; and society makes her an *other* – a victim again to carry the stigma to death.

IV. PLIGHTS & TRAGEDY OF THE WAR HEROINE

"In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is other: she is objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks, and the men (allegedly) have." (Tyson, 2006)

In a patriarchal society, women are oppressed and exploited only for male benefit. Women are systematically weak in such a society, but when they are stigmatized, they become the weakest. Etymologically, the word patriarchy refers to "the rule of the father." It is a social system in which the father rules his family and passes his power on to his sons. A patriarchal social system means that the men are all in all in the system holding all the power. Since the power exercising agencies and instruments of society is completely in the hands of the male, according to Kate Millet, the men dominate over the women; and the male domination mainly begins from the family by differentiating gender roles where the women are always considered inferior. From family, this domination reaches the public

dimension where everything is also in the male hand. (Millett, 1970) Therefore, it is the men who have to power to elevate the status of women as well as a stereotype and strips their rights in society. In patriarchy, women are considered either good or bad. Good women are fragile, submissive, and sexually pure; bad women do not possess these qualities. It is evident that patriarchal men want good women when they want to start a family.

In the case of Yasmin, she does not belong to the good women category because she is sexually impure – she is raped by the Pakistani soldiers during the war of liberation. Again, she is stigmatized since the word *birangona* is synonymous with a prostitute. “Often prostitutes are commonly viewed as fallen women who exist on the periphery of the society and are perceived as consumable commodities by those who seek to exploit them.” (Karmakar 2021) The overall situation makes her alienated in society. These things make Yasmin a good prey to an agent of patriarchy and capitalism who seeks to sexually exploit Yasmin for economic gain.

It is said that “capitalist patriarchy is a two headed beast. If we single out patriarchy from capitalist patriarchy, the capitalist one become more fearsome.” (Tong, 2014). In *Letters of Blood*, Rahman depicts that Yasmin falls prey to an agent of the capitalism. A so-called educated gentleman who has not given a name in the novel marries her. It seems a magnanimous marriage first, and the news of such marriage is published in the newspaper. Nevertheless, soon after the marriage, the man is found to be a hypocrite and a beast. The family they start becomes the new site of oppression and economic exploitation. It reveals that the man has married Yasmin only to sexually exploit her, and he has already had a wife in the village. His sole aim is to use Yasmin as a resource for economic gain; to do so, he gets her to sell her father’s house first. By marriage, the man gets authority over Yasmin and her body so that he does not hesitate to commit heinous crimes against her for the reason that in a patriarchal society, “Women’s sexuality is, socially, a thing to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered or exchanged by others [those others being males]. Women never possess it.” (Karmakar, 2021)

He physically abuses and mentally tortures Yasmin the same way she has gone through during the war. One night “he forced Yasmin to drink. And enjoyed her all night in a group along with his friends.” (Rahman, 2016). Again, he brutally tortures her when she tries to stop him. He considers her a property and barter her body for business contracts to become rich. For this reason, he brings new people home to sleep with Yasmin. Hartman states that patriarchal control is mainly maintained through the appropriation of women’s labor. (Chowdhury, 2009). Yasmin’s husband maintains control by forcing her to work as a prostitute. He perpetuates physical and mental torture by reminding her traumatic experiences: “If you could sleep with Panjabi rouges, why not all this.” (Rahman, 2016). Using Yasmin’s labor, he eventually becomes rich, buys another house, and brings

his wife, mother, and sister from the village to live in it. Therefore, only for being a *birangona*, Yasmin is victimized again. Her body is commodified, and she is mentally violated. Thus, as an agent of patriarchy, her husband forces her to go through the same experiences she went through during the liberation war.

Another unfeeling member of the patriarchal society, Yasmin's uncle, is also complicit in the oppression. When Yasmin seeks help to get out of this situation, he humiliates and turns her down. She is a fallen and sinful woman to his eyes. Though it is her husband who has forced her into sleeping with other men for his own business gain, it is Yasmin to bear the stigma; it is Yasmin whose reputation is bad. Since society is ruled by men, a man like Yasmin's husband's crime goes unnoticed and unpunished. Yasmin being a woman alone, bears all the blame.

Consequently, Yasmin undergoes the same harrowing experiences for what she is called the *birangona* or heroic woman, which turns out to be ironic. From the hands of the Pakistani Army and their collaborators, she falls in the hand of patriarchal and capitalist perpetrators. Though she is honored as a *Birangona*, her fate remains unchanged. She travels from one prison to another to encounter various degrees of brutalities and violence.

Not only is her husband a hypocrite, but Yasmin finds that the entire patriarchal society is hypocritical. He is just an embodiment of the entire patriarchal system, which has "purchased its freedom, its fame in return for the life of a woman." (Rahman, 2016). The society Yasmin lives in gives her honor in a name. In reality, it victimizes her in the name of honor and reduces her individual self. Her husband wants her to be well dressed and to go to different places with different men for his business gain. She cannot take it anymore. She harbors great resentment and anger to him and to the society that she cannot put into words. Eventually, she determines to leave it. But she has no place to go. Since she has limited options, she reasons, "if the war has really turned me into a whore, why should I let the cream of society enjoy the fruits? I'm a whore. I'll become a real one", (Rahman, 2016) and takes Golapipatti, as her last resort. It is the patriarchal society that pushes Yasmin to be a part of the brothel. When she finds no way out from the clutches of men, no means to alleviate her pains, she comes out from the domain of so-called civil society to live in the brothel. The patriarchal society and its unfeeling members are solely responsible for turning Yasmin- a war heroine- into a whore.

Yasmin is denied to live a normal life only for being a *birangona*. She is never treated as a human being. She is always treated as a woman – an unnatural one, a *birangona*. Even when in search of a normal life, the men who hold the power torture her psychologically. In the job interviews, they ask her to describe the experiences in detail. This is nothing but psychological torture. The questions they ask have a damaging effect on her mind.

The Pakistani soldiers violated her body, the interviewers being men, violated her mind, and when she gets married, her husband takes patriarchal and male privileges along with other agents of patriarchy to violate both her body and mind again. The whole society makes her life horrible. Ironically, a journalist and writer named Delwar Hussain, who befriends Yasmin in Gollapipatti, wants to tell her misery to the society through his writings; he asks her about his but Yasmin bursts out with anger and resentment: "The society that is rotting like a body of a leaper with gaping wounds. I loathe it. I detest all gentlemen like you." (Rahman, 2016) In fact, it is the so-called gentlemen of the society who have pushed her at this point.

V. CONCLUSION

Being a subject to patriarchy, a victim to a capitalist man, Yasmin loses the ability to imagine and live her own life as a normal human being. Her full human potential is spoiled by the hypocritical society that is run by men. Therefore, the trajectory of Yasmin's tragic life is dictated by the patriarchy. She does not get familial support, rather her newly started family becomes a new site of oppression and violation; she does not have community support either. Though, "the Bangladesh Government attempted to reduce social ostracism of the raped women through a public policy of referring to them as *Birangonas* (war heroines)" (Mookherjee, 2022), it backfires in society. As Rahman perceives in *Letter of Blood*, the government awarded honor identifies the raped women formally within the patriarchal system, and with its perceived notion about women and gender, Yasmin's honor turns into stigma in the system. She is gradually pushed to the boundary of the so called civil society: firstly, the stigma of being a *barangona* from *birangona* reduces her as an individual; thus her scopes and opportunities to live a regular life become limited. Then, she falls prey to a capitalist patriarchal man who takes authority on her body by marriage, oppresses, and exploits her. The hypocrisy of the society enhances her mental and physical sufferings. The society treats her inhumanly by stripping her every rights through humiliation, oppression, and perpetration only for being a *birangona*. Getting no space to breath, Yasmin takes Gollapipatti as her final resort to live. In the end, she is killed in the brothel while she is trying to rescue another prostitute from the violence of men.

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