

As a War Heroine, I Speak

In 1972, while working closely with various National and International Organisations to rehabilitate the raped and tortured women of the Liberation War, Nilima Ibrahim (1921-2002) interviewed some of these heroic women and kept a detailed journal of her experience, which she later published in a book form in 1994. Needless to say, Ibrahim used fictitious names for her characters in order to protect their privacy.

In her reportage, Neela Haider, the main narrator of Ami Birangana Bolchi (As a War heroine, I Speak), discloses the harrowing struggles of these women of war. This excerpt from Chapter One is the story of Tara Nielsen, a courageous woman, whom the narrator first met at the Dhanmondi Women's Rehabilitation Centre in 1972, and then later in Denmark.

A longer version of this translation is available online.

NILIMA IBRAHIM

I lived in Rajshahi during those raging days of 1971. My father, a medical doctor, set up his private practice in a provincial town there. Once a government official, my father left his job after the language movement of 1952 and moved to Rajshahi where he built a small house with a nice garden. My grandmother passed away before we moved to that beautiful house. By the end of 1970, my oldest sister got married and moved to her new home in Kolkata. My oldest brother, a medical student in his final year, joined the political movement that was getting stronger every day. My mother was a little annoyed but my father welcomed my brother's decision whole-heartedly. My mother would worry about most things anyway; she would often grumble whenever my father stayed late at his office. Father used to laugh and tease her, saying "Haven't you heard what Sheikh Mujib said? 'Grab whatever you have and confront your assailants...'" Mother used to frown at him and retort, "Yes, I have heard that many a times, but what weapons do you have to attack your assailant with?" My father always said, "I have you and I have a son and a daughter here with me; and I have my two strong hands." Even though he always tried to assure her, I knew he was somehow disturbed. I knew he hardly slept those days; he would wake up in the middle of the night and pace restlessly on the verandah. I did not know the cause of his anxiety. It could be that he foresaw the signs of an impending danger.

The situation started to grow worse by mid March, but people stayed unified and did not lose courage amidst all threats. The darkest night of March 25 descended upon the country to cast the dice of destruction upon us. Things started to change rapidly after that night. On the morning of the 26th, we saw strangers walking around our house. Mother did not stop counting her prayer beads and Father kept pacing restlessly on the verandah. We hid ourselves inside the darkness of our own house like a bunch of rodents. By the morning of March 27, my parents and I were ready to flee. We hastily packed and left the house stealthily before dawn, planning to reach a distant village where no one could harm us. There was no rickshaw on the street, and there was no transportation available anywhere. We kept walking as fast as we could. We walked for hours until our local Chairman's jeep suddenly pulled over and blocked our way. "Where are you going, Doctor?" The Chairman of our precinct asked, "Come, let me give you a ride to your destination." My father politely refused the offer and we



Kazi Abdul Baset, The Unbearable Life 1971.

resumed our walk. Suddenly a group of four or five thugs jumped out and pulled me into the jeep. No one fired any gun, and no one got killed. I didn't know what happened to my parents. The jeep ran at high speed to reach its destination. I had no sense of time and place and I think I passed out for a moment. When I opened my eyes, I found myself sitting on a chair, surrounded by strange faces. A man in military uniform sat inquisitively in front of me. I realised I was in a police station. Since the Army Officer behaved like a gentleman, I decided to ask him, "Why have I been brought here?" He replied, "It's for your own safety." I looked around and saw a few girls sitting, scattered and sobbing. Some of them were wailing and were being chastised for doing so. Sister Neela, I can remember everything so vividly, as if it just happened right now! They brought bread and bananas and tea for us. I kept pleading to the Army Officer asking him to let me go. In response, the Army Officer told me he was quite impressed to hear me speak to him in flawless English. The whole day passed slowly as I sat there. The Chairman of our precinct came back in the afternoon, and I fell to his feet the moment I saw him. "Uncle, please help me!" I pleaded, "Uncle,

you used to say you treat my father as your own brother, don't you remember? Don't you remember uncle that I am your daughter's friend? Your daughter Sultana and I go to the same school; we study in the same class, remember? We always play together. I used to visit your house. You have known me since I was a little child. Uncle, please, please help me! Save me! Show some pity!" The Chairman shook me away from his feet and left; and thus I knew I was left there as a piece of meat, to be devoured by the hungry tiger. And that moment, as the Chairman turned around and left, I watched a human being transform into an animal. I only saw animals after that day, animals, all around and over me; I did not see a human being until December 16.

The officer caressed me as he took me with him. He drove the jeep and kept telling me stories of his glorious manhood. But I was not paying attention to him. My head was busy planning an escape. I was sitting in the front passenger's seat and two security guards sat at the back. As the Officer kept weaving his stories of heroism, I suddenly jumped from the running jeep. When I woke up, I found myself lying in a hospital bed. My head was wrapped in

bandages and my whole body was really sore. The small hospital was mostly run by male staff; there was no other girl there besides me. They brought a little girl from somewhere to look after me. The girl was homesick and kept crying the whole time. It took me about three days to recover, and all the while, the Officer always came in the morning and stayed with me the whole day. You know, there is this belief in our culture that before you slaughter an animal, you have to make sure that the sacrificial animal is healthy and disease free; those men were trying to make sure I was fit for the slaughter. After the third day, I was able to sit up and move around a little; the Officer left in the evening, promising to be back for me the next day.

The first man who violated me that night was a Bangalee, my own countryman. I was too weak to fight back, and too shocked to absorb the truth. My head was not strong yet, and my body lay powerless, being violated by a bestial Bangalee man. But that was only the start. I don't exactly remember how many of them raped me that night, maybe six or seven, or maybe more. When the Army Officer came next morning and found my disheveled body,

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