

As a War Heroine, I Speak

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

Medical College Hospital. I found myself surrounded by female patients, a lot of them. It was lunchtime when I arrived there, and a nurse put a plateful of rice and curry in front of me. I burst into tears as I took the plate from the nurse's hand. She stroked my hair and talked to me affectionately, asking me to eat. I was starving and ate voraciously. A simple meal of rice and curry, but it was the best food I had eaten! I felt alive. What a fool I was to think that I was alive! I wish I knew that day how many times I had to die before I could finally be alive again!

I was pregnant, the doctor told me. She asked me if I had any place to go. Should she contact anyone on my behalf? "I have no one," I said. "I have nowhere to go and no one to call. Do whatever you do with helpless women like me." And that's when the kind doctor sent me to the Dhanmondi Women's Rehabilitation Centre, where you saw me. When I was staying at the female ward of the Medical College Hospital, I used to see a large crowd of visitors—men and women—glancing at us with inquisitive eyes. The attending nurse told me they came to see the heroines of the war. "Heroines of the war? Who are they?" I asked the nurse. "You and the other women like you," the nurse continued: "The Prime Minister has declared that women who have given their honour and lost their dignity for the country are no less heroes and contributed equally for the freedom of the country. He honoured these brave women of the war by calling them his war-heroines." I lowered my head in respect to my leader, the architect of our freedom. He had given me the highest respect by awarding me the title of a war heroine. I felt proud, but then again, why did I still feel depressed? Why couldn't I control my tears?

I was getting desperate to contact my family. I wrote down my father's name and address in a piece of paper and gave it to Mosfeka Mahmud, the Executive Officer at the Rehabilitation Centre, requesting her to contact him on my behalf. I spent countless hours, waiting eagerly for my father; but he did not show up. The house was all broken into pieces and he was busy fixing the house, he wrote. But he would come soon, very soon, he wrote again. "O, dear Father!" I screamed inside my head, "You are just like the rest of them; you are no exception!" I started avoiding all people after that—all the outsiders. The Polish Medical doctor who was in charge of the Rehabilitation Centre was very nice. I requested her to train me as her nurse and she gladly agreed. I put my worries and my frustrations behind and concentrated on work.

I finally agreed to go through the abortion process. It was a difficult decision, but I was well aware of my situation and I knew I had nowhere to go. No one would accept my baby in this world. So I decided not to mother an unwanted baby. Tell me, how can a mother in her right mind agree to part with her child? Sister Neela, do you remember Marjina, the fifteen-year-old girl? The poor girl was desperate to keep

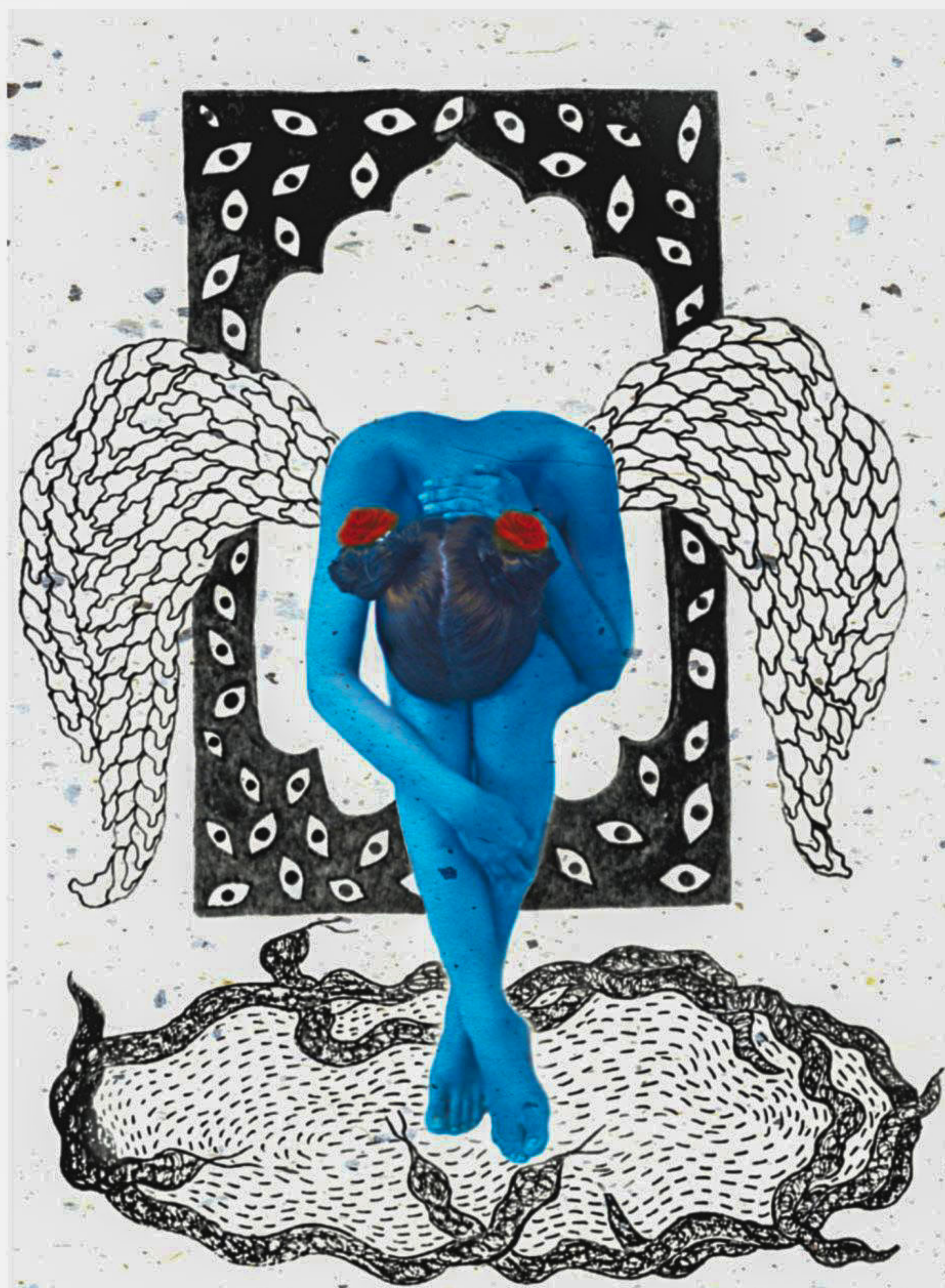
her son with her and did not want to put him for adoption. Every time you visited the centre, she would scream at you, thinking that you were there to steal her child. You eventually took the baby and sent him somewhere to live with a new family. But you stopped visiting the centre after that. Why, Sister Neela? Were you heartbroken after you took away Marjina's son?"

"Yes, I was." To tell you the truth, of all the rehabilitative works that I have done, sending Marjina's son to Sweden with his adopted parents was the hardest one. I even pleaded with *Bangabondhu*, asking him to allow Marjina to keep her son with her. But the Prime Minister did not agree. He said, "Please, sister, put all these fatherless children for adoption and give them a chance to live a healthy life somewhere else. Besides, what will I do with these children of rapes? I do not want to nurture them in this country." I had no other options open, Tara."

"And I decided to fight my own battle, alone. Father suddenly showed up one day. He had grown old in one single year. He put his arms around me and held me tightly as he cried aloud, like a little child. I cried the same way the other day, when a group of us went to meet *Bangabondhu*, our beloved leader and Prime Minister of the country. I cried like a little girl when he spoke to us tenderly, calling us his brave mothers: "You all are my brave mothers and have sacrificed your most precious wealth to gain freedom for your country! You are the bravest of all heroes of any war. You are my courageous war heroines! You sacrificed everything for the country, and now I am here for you. I promise to take care of you, my brave mothers." The words of *Bangabondhu* brought tears in my eyes, but my eyes shed no tears when I stood close to my own father and watched him cry like a helpless child. Why couldn't I cry, do you know, Sister Neela? What made my heart so cold? What was I thinking about? I freed myself from my father's embrace and asked him, "Should we start for home

My brother told me,
"We will come and
visit you here, but
you should not think
of returning home.
And one more thing,
you also should not
write letters to us.
You are doing fine
here, anyway."

today? Then I have to notify the office...." And he faltered. "Not today, my girl," He said in a hesitant voice, "The house is not completely fixed yet, and I have a houseful of visitors. Your maternal uncles are visiting us; your sister Kali and her husband are planning to visit soon. I will come back for you when they are all



Dipa Mahbuba Yasmin, *Pink Myth of Hell*.

gone." I distanced myself from him and said in a cold voice, "Father, I understand; but please don't come to see me anymore." I saw pain and shock in his eyes. "No!" He said, "Don't say that!" He handed me a small fruit basket and left. My father visited me a few more times after that, but he never asked me to go home with him.

By the way, Shyamal, the man of my dream also came to visit me. He came for a totally different purpose though: he wanted to see a war heroine with his own eyes. My brother also came from Kolkata and brought me a nice sari. My brother grew up to be quite a strong and brave man, you know. He had the courage to speak about things that my father was hesitant to utter. "Don't you take any whimsical decision to come back home, Tara." My brother told me, "We will come and visit you here, but you should not think of returning home. And one more thing, you also should not write letters to us. You are doing fine here, anyway. I have got a good job and the government has given us a good chunk of money as compensation. We are mending the house,

and..." I stood up and left the room in the middle of the conversation. I walked away and did not look back at him, not even once. And the next time he saw me, I was not his helpless wretched sister Tara anymore; I was a proud and accomplished Mrs. T Nielsen."

Translated by Fayeza Hasanat.

Born on January 11, 1921, Nilima Ibrahim was a Bangladeshi educationist and social worker. In her most noted work, *Ami Birangona Bolchi*, she highlighted the courage and perseverance of war heroines of the Liberation War. Her other literary works include *Bish Shataker Meye* (1958), *Ek Path Dui Baank* (1958), *Sharat-Pratibha* (1960), *Begum Rokeya* (1974), etc.

She earned her Bachelor's in Arts and Teaching from the Scottish Church College, following it with an MA in Bangla literature from the University of Calcutta in 1943. She also earned a doctorate in Bangla literature from the University of Dhaka in 1959.

She was a professor of Dhaka University's Bangla department. She also served as the chairperson of the Bangla Academy, and as the Vice Chairperson of the World Women's Federation's South Asian Zone. She was honoured with the Bangla Academy Award (1969), *Ananya Literary Award* (1996) and the *Ekushey Padak* (2000), apart from Independence Day Award (2011), which was awarded to her posthumously. The prolific writer passed away on June 18, 2002 at the age of 81.

Fayeza Hasanat is a PhD student in English, University of Central Florida.