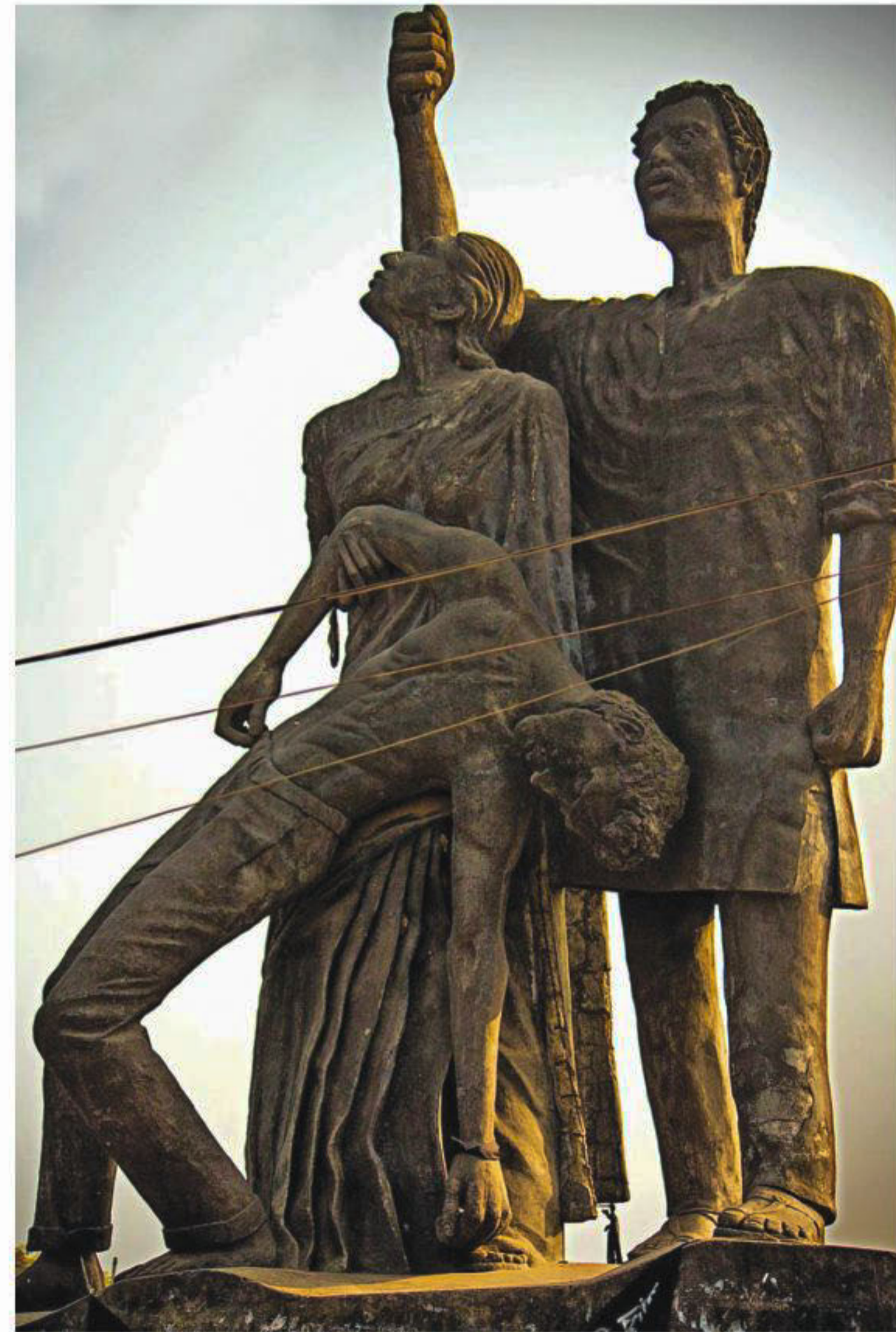


| LONGFORM |



Amar Ekushey, Jahanara Pervin



War Pieta, Max Ginsburg

MARTYR'S MOTHER IN AMAR EKUSHEY

The depiction of the mother and her martyred son represents a religious iconography dating back to the crucifixion of Christ. Many such depictions show a grieving mother displaying intense emotions at the death of her son. Some even take the opportunity to show women from the viewpoint of the male gaze, as objects of desire. Jahanara Pervin's Amar Ekushey does neither. As a feminist sculpture, the work represents the mother's strength, spirit and character. She looks not for sympathy, but for vengeance. Thus, Amar Ekushey is an original work that depicts women from a feminist standpoint at a turning point in Bangladesh's violent history.

Italian Renaissance artist Michelangelo's *Pieta* (1498), which depicts the Virgin Mary with Christ's dead body on her lap or in her arms after the crucifixion, has become one of the most common western Christian images since the 14th century. *Pieta* means "pity" in Italian and the theme has been widely represented in both painting and sculpture. Although the theme of *Pieta* is predominantly Christian, modern artists have strived to give it a novel expression with no subliminal Christian meaning. For instance, French-born American artist Max Ginsberg's *War Pieta* (1931) depicts the same motif, but in the context of war, with a woman cradling her dead son in her arms just as Mary held Christ.

In Bangladeshi art, this theme has been portrayed in the context of the Bengali Language Movement of 1952 and as well the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The 1991 sculpture *Amar Ekushey*, located at Jahangirnagar University, is the work

AN EXHIBITION OF SYMPATHY OR COURAGE?

SELIMA QUADER CHOWDHURY

of Bangladeshi sculptor Jahanara Parvin and follows the context of the former. It was commissioned to commemorate the martyrs of the Language Movement.

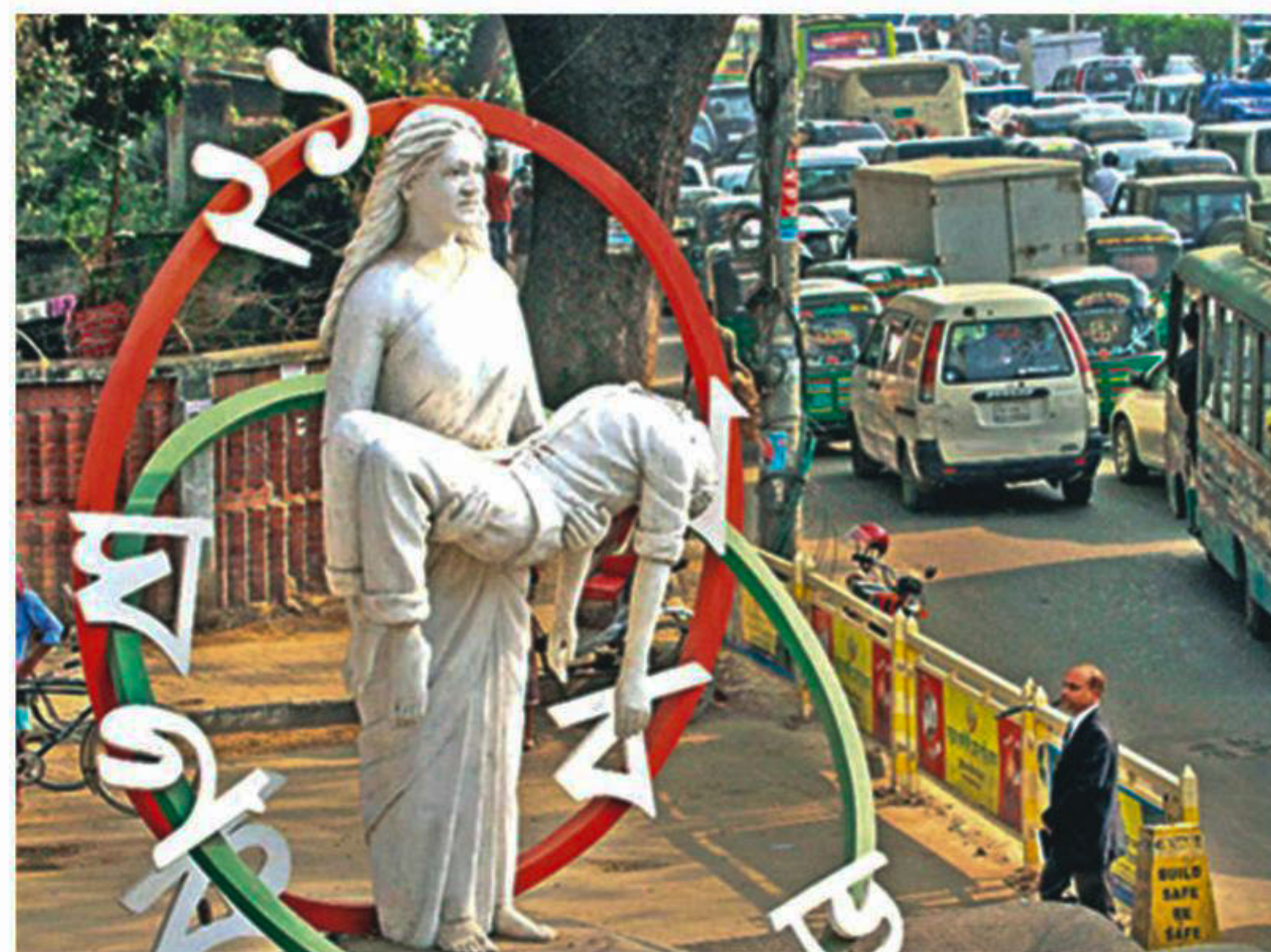
The sculpture represents the mother of a language martyr carrying the dead son in her arms. A man, an activist, stands next to her. The raised fist of his right hand gives a strong impression of "unity, strength, defiance or resistance" which prevailed among the activists, while his half-open mouth represents the act of chanting slogans in favour of the Bengali language. The mother looks upward, her chin raised, displaying pride, courage and confidence and a refusal to show her grief at the death of her son. This contrasts with American realist painter Ginsberg's *War Pieta*, in which the

mother is screaming in agony over the death of her soldier son. The absence of the mother's pain and tears of mourning in *Amar Ekushey* contradicts the image of the grief-stricken mother in the most influential song of the Language Movement, "Amar Bhaier Rokte Rangano":

My brother's blood-spattered 21 February
Can I forget the 21st of February
incarnadined by the love of my brother?
The 21st of February, built by the tears
of a hundred mothers robbed of their sons,
Can I ever forget it?

The anguish of the mother mourning over the body of her child, in this case a

Continued to page 7



Jononi o Gorbhito Bornomala, Mrinal Haque

| LONGFORM |

MARTYR'S MOTHER IN AMAR EKUSHEY

After page 12

martyr of the Liberation War, can be seen in Bangladeshi artist Mostafa Monowar's *Shopoth*. The eyes of the mother are reminiscent of sculptures of Sumerian worshippers, which were given to the temple to pray in place of the person who donated them. They have a wide-eyed gaze, an essential feature of these sculptures, which represents the fact that they should constantly remain awake in order to worship God on behalf of their donors. The wide eyes of the mother in Mostafa's *Shopoth* (1979) mirror the sleepless nights of agony that she will be enduring after the death of her child. This suffering is also delineated through the gesture of her raised hands.

In Hashem Khan's painting *Language*



Pieta, Michelangelo

Movement, the agony of a mother has been enhanced by the mother's scream and hand gestures, while the image of the male martyr has been rendered more distinct by the use of the colour white against a more vibrant background. Feminist artist Farida Zaman also depicts the mourning mother with a dead child on her lap, but unlike Mostafa and Hashem, she portrays the plight of the grief-stricken mother through the representation of dishevelled hair. Mrinal Haque's 2016 sculpture *Jononi o Gorbhito Bornomala* depicts a mother holding her dead son who has been killed by gunfire during the Language Movement uprising. Like *Amar Ekushey*, the martyr's mother shows little emotion and has a calm and gentle demeanour, like the Virgin Mary in *Pieta*.

Historically, the female body is represented in art through the male gaze, making it appear passive and sexualised, appropriate for male voyeuristic pleasure. As historian John Berger stated: "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." Art historian TJ Clark also argued that the female nude was meant for men to look at since she "is constructed as an object of somebody else's desire". During the feminist art movement in the 1970s, female artists attempted to reclaim their bodies and express their sexual feelings through art. They strove to portray female sexuality in a new light, contradicting conventional ways of representing the female body through the male gaze.

In American realist painter Bo Bartlett's *Civil War*, the mother cradling her dead son has been objectified as she looks directly at the audience though her mournful eyes. She does not scream or



Shopoth, Mostafa Monowar



Ma er Kanna, Farida Zaman

representation of women. The mother's confident posture and appearance demonstrates her refusal to show any grief over her son's death, which resonates more with the Spartan Mother, who took pride if her son became victorious in war and ridiculed their failure, saying: "Come home with your shield or upon it".

Interestingly, in French sculptor Edgar Henri Boutry's *The Body of a Dead Spartan Delivered to his Mother* (1857), the Spartan mother seems grief-stricken as she holds her dead son (Figure 11). French painter Jean Jacques François Lebarbier's *A Spartan Woman Giving a Shield to Her Son* (1805) does not represent the attributes of the Spartan Mother either. Instead she has a soft and docile demeanour, like the Virgin Mary in the old masters' paintings, "almost always portrayed as pure, soft, sweet, and decidedly non-martial", in the words of Shannon E French. She is not objectified, but she does not have a strong and powerful presence like the mother in *Amar Ekushey*.

The depiction of the mother in *Amar Ekushey* also epitomises the audacious spirit and courage of Jahanara Imam, the Bangladeshi writer and political activist acclaimed as the "Shaheed Janani" (Mother of Martyrs). One of her most courageous efforts was to speak up on the subject of the trial of the war criminals after the Liberation War. In 1986, Jahanara Imam published her wartime diary "Ekatturer Dinguli" ("The Days of 71"), in which she shared her pain and suffering at losing her eldest son who fought against the Pakistani army, as well as her husband, during the war. The depiction of a mother lamenting over her dead son during the Liberation War of Bangladesh vividly reflects the unbearable pain Jahanara Imam went through in losing her son. In *Amar Ekushey* the mother's face is directed towards the open sky, evoking a pledge to avenge her son's death. As such, the mother in *Amar Ekushey* demonstrates the strong and courageous nature of Jahanara Imam, which is not often seen in the portrayal of the martyrs' mothers in the artwork of the Liberation War.

Selima Quader Chowdhury is a lecturer at the General Education Department, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh.



Allegory of Painting, Artemisia Gentileschi

Amar Ekushey contrasts strongly with the *Pieta* of the old masters' paintings and the depiction of the mother with her dead son in modern and contemporary art. The martyr's mother shows no sign of grief. Instead, her courage is reflected in her posture. Her raised chin and upward gaze exudes feminist consciousness, which make her distinct from the martyr's mother in other artwork.

Selima Quader Chowdhury is a lecturer at the General Education Department, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh.

- References
- Berger, John (1972) *Ways of Seeing*: London: British Broadcasting Corporation; Harmondsworth: Penguin
 - Ed. Sirajul Islam and assisted by Harun-or-Rashid (1992) *History of Bangladesh 1704-1971*: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh
 - Uddin, Sufia (2006) *Constructing Bangladesh: religion, ethnicity, and language in an Islamic nation*: University of North Carolina Press
 - Mathews, Patricia. "Returning the Gaze: Diverse Representations of the Nude in the Art of Suzanne Valadon." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (Sept 1991), pp. 415-430: College Art Association
 - Ziegler, Joanna. "Michelangelo and the Medieval Pieta: The Sculpture of Devotion or the Art of Sculpture?" *Gesta*, Vol.34, No.1 (1995), pp. 28-36
 - French, Shannon E. "With Your Shield or on It: Challenging the Pacifist Mother Archetype" *Public Affairs Quarterly*, Vol.15, No.1 (Jan.,2001), pp.51-63

Photo courtesy: Selima Quader Chowdhury