

WOMEN ON SCREEN

*Representing Women by
Women in Bangladesh Cinema*

BIKASH CH. BHOWMICK



Women of Screen
Representing Women by Women in Bangladesh Cinema

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Forward

Bangladesh Film Archive (BFA)'s film related Publication program aims at developing a forum for exchanging opinion, knowledge and experience of preserving national memory, history, culture and heritage through film. The outcome of the program is 9 publications in 2009-2010 financial year including three film-research reports supported by BFA revenue budget; three biographical book under development budget on Udayan Chowdhury, Sumita Devi and Salahuddin—three legendary figures of Bangladesh film; Bangladesh Film Archive Journal (2nd issue and reprint of 1st issue) and Citizen Charter of BFA. This is the first time in the country that such a good number of film related publications are coming out in a single year under an institutional arrangement.

It is commonly alleged that women are not well represented in Bangladesh film due to the commercial intent in a male dominating society like ours. Also film critics do not raise the issues of women's rights, dignity and integrity before the filmmakers to incorporate those in their film. But what happens when film are produced and directed by women? How do they picturise their own characteristics in film? Do they uphold the issues of women's identity, independence and crisis in their films? These issues have been dealt with in details by the young researcher Bikash Chandra Bhowmick in his work. I do believe the research will add something new to our film literature.

Despite all limitations we expect people from all walks of life shall continue their support in our effort to build up BFA as an integrated institution dedicated to film preservation, study, research and efforts to create awareness in this regard.

Dhaka
16 Ashar 1416
30 June 2009

Dr. Mohammad Jahangir Hossain
Director General
Bangladesh Film Archive

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Dedicated

to

My Father, Mother & my Heavenly Eldest Brother & also

to

Women who raise their voice against any kind of unjust

Abstract

Film criticisms/studies from academic as well as ideological standpoint are rare in Bangladesh. Though a little has been done, that is basically on art cinema or independent film. Our film intellectuals have always kept away from mainstream/commercial film culture. Here an attempt has been done to make a study on women's representation that covers both mainstream and independent films.

To conduct the study, I dealt with six mainstream and eleven documentary films. The mainstream films are Kabori Sarwar's *Ayna* (2006), Kohinoor Akhter Suchanda's *Hazar Bachhor Dhore (Symphony of Agony, 2005)*, Nargis Akter's *Char Sateenere Ghar (Four Wives' Forum, 2005)* & *Meghla Akash* (2002), Samia Zaman's *Ranikuthir Baki Itihash* (2006) and Arifa Zaman Moushumi's *Kakhano Megh Kakhano Bristi* (2003). And the documentary films are Fauzia Khan's *The Expeditors* (2001), *Long Way to Go* (2003-2004), *I had Something to Say* (2005-2006), *Perception-The Other Canvas* (1999); Shabnam Ferdousi's *In Quest of Life* (2004-05); Nasrin Siraj Annie's *Motherhood: Women's Perspective*(2004); Neegar's *The Beauty Worker* (2004); Samera Haque & Ummul Khaer Fatma's *From Strength to Strength*, (2004-2005); Farzana Rupa, Lutfun Nahar Mausumi & Shabnam Ferdousi's *Molested Lives: Mothers & Daughters* (2004); Khaleda Akhtar Rosy's *A tale of Far away hills* (2007); and Mushfequa Alam Camellia's *Heaven Searcher* (2007).

In my study, I discussed about the different modes of representation of women in these films by women

filmmakers in Bangladesh. I also studied objectification of women on screen as well as the roles (wife, mother, adulteress, and defendant) women are given on screen by these women directors in Bangladesh.

I observed that among all the mainstream films, only in K. Sarwar's *Ayna*, women have been portrayed in a way that challenges the traditional roles of women in society. In *Ayna*, most of the time women are represented as if they are independent, have no dependencies on their male counterpart and they have a distinctive identity, which separate them from male as a human being. On the other hand, in most of the documentary films women's non-traditional images have had importance than their traditional roles in the society. We have seen in documentary films that women have been trying to discover themselves in a new social environment with new forms of identities.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	1-7
Introduction	
1.1 The Background	
1.3 Reason and Scope of the Study	
1.4 Constraints of the study	
1.5 Research Methodology	
Chapter 2	8-13
Theoretical Framework: Film and Feminism	
Chapter 3	14-25
Women in Director's Chair: In the World and in Bangladesh	
3.1 Women in Director's Chair: In the World Context	
3.2 Women in Director's Chair: In Bangladesh context	
Chapter 4	26-45
Representing Modes of Women by Women in Bangladesh Popular Cinema	
4.1 Objects: The Most Dominating Screen Identity of Women	
4.1.1 'Male Gaze' and Female Bodies as objects in Bangladesh Women's Cinema	
4.1.2 When Women are free to Desire in Bangladesh Women's Cinema	

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Chapter 4	26-45
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4.1 Objects: The Most Dominating Screen Identity of Women	
4.1.1 'Male Gaze' and Female Bodies as objects in Bangladesh Women's Cinema	
4.1.2 When Women are free to Desire in Bangladesh Women's Cinema	

4.2 Mother: Myth Mother and Screen Mother- biologically & metaphorically	
4.3 Wife: Sita, the other name	
4.4 Defendant: A rare identity of Woman	
Chapter 5	46-56
Polygamy and Adultery – Two Weapons, account for Women’s Oppression and Deprivation	
Chapter 6	57-60
Women’s Independence, Dependency and Identity	
Chapter 7	61-79
Women in Independent Films	
7.1 Films on Women with Non-traditional Images	
7.2 Motherhood: a new experience for women	
7.3 Films on Women’s Protests	
7.4 Films on Women’s Objectification	
7.5 Films on Women’s Dependency and Identity	
Chapter 8	80-81
Conclusion	
Filmographies	82-89
Bibliography	90-93
Index	94-96



Introduction

1.1 The Background

Cinema is a social phenomenon, an entertainment industry, an art form and a means of thought and pleasure, bearing the marks of ongoing struggles over the control of public life, personal freedoms and artistic achievement. “Feminist film practice, exercised by both spectators and filmmaker, understands these domains as dynamic, where power is exercised, perpetuated, or forged into new and more progressive forms.”¹

The relationship between women and film has a very significant literature. This kind of relationship is very complex and fascinating. There are some interesting research works on third world feminism, which illuminates the aspects of the representation of women in Indian films.² Unfortunately this kind of in-depth research has not yet been done in Bangladesh on this interesting as well as complex topic of film like women's roles, identity formation, women in male masquerade, gender etc. though the relationship between women and cinema has produced vast literature in Indian and other contexts. The scenerio is almost same in every aspect of film research in Bangladesh. We have a

¹ Chatterji, Shoma A. *Subject: Cinema Object: Woman*. Calcutta, Parumita Publications, 1998, p. 1

² Gokulsing, K. Moti & Dissanayake Wimal. *Indian popular cinema - a narrative of cultural change*, Orient Longman, 1998, p. 75

very handful number of researchers doing research on film. Among these researcher's research works one would find only one in-depth research which was done by Zakir Hossain Raju, a leading film researcher and documentary film maker in Bangladesh. It is his Ph.D. dissertiton (unpublished). In his research, Dr. Raju talks about some important aspects of identity formation in relation to the development of cinema in Bangladesh. The key issues he deals with are: national cinema study and beginning of/in Bangladesh film history, cultural identity and Bengali cinema in colonial Bengal, Bengali-Muslim cultural identity and Dhaka film industry, and popular cinema and nation-state modernity in contemporary Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, I found three research works (including my M.A. dissertation) regarding women's representation on cinema screens. In her M.A. thesis, Sheikh Mahmuda Sultana wrote that in Dhakai cinema women were depicted as "Nosta" (Wanton/Unchaste), "Extra" and "Suttee" and men were depicted as "Danob" (Monster), "Debota" (Idol) and "Poti" (Husband) (Nasrin, 2002: 191). In her research, Fowzia Khan has explained that now on screen there is no contribution of women's character except sexuality.

Her presence on the screen is almost always passive (Mahmudul Hossain, 2005-6: 97-98). Fowzia also said, "Most of the contemporary films of Bangladesh directed by male filmmakers represent women stereotypically though female characters are now occupying a substantial amount of screen time."

Now I think it needs to be seen the screen presentation of Bengali women in mainstream/popular films by our female filmmakers along with independent films.

The modes of representation of women in cinema of Bangladesh by women filmmakers are the key issues for my

study. This means that how do our women filmmakers like to see and show their female characters – as mother, wife, birth giving machine, daughter, suttee, defendant, dependent or woman as a human being?

1.2 Aims of the study

My aim in this project is to explore how women have been constructed within the film. To reach my aim I have setup the following objectives for my study :

1. to detect the modes of representation of women by female directors of Bangladesh cinema.
2. to get an idea of how women are objectified in women's film and women as object of male desire.

1.3 Reason & Scope of the Study

'Women on Screen: Representing Women by Women in Bangladesh Cinema' has been selected for my study. It has been selected because no in-depth research had been done before here in Bangladesh on this sort of topics and of course my interest and my previous research experiences have persuaded me to select this topic. Along side this, I think people need to have a clear conception about how mainstream and independent filmmakers represent women in their respective films.

Since this is a qualitative research, I have a very small population size. That is, we have only nine mainstream women filmmakers and sixteen independent women filmmakers (approximate)– made film individually and/or collectively (1956-2006). Among them, to conduct my study I have dealt with six feature films by five women mainstream filmmakers and eleven shorter length films by

eleven independent filmmakers. Note that, among independent films most of them are documentary. The selection of the films has been conducted on the basis of the availability and content of the films.

1.4 Constraints of the study

This is perhaps the first socio-ideological study in a larger context except my previous research in Bangladesh, for which I could not find substantial literary materials of previous studies to conduct to my research. A study regarding women's stereotyped representation was done in 1997-98 education year for having a degree by Sheikh Mahmuda Sultana under the department of Mass Communication & Journalism, University of Dhaka and another research was done by Fowzia Khan. Fowzia Khan published in a book has discussed very little about our film. Her discussion has been conducted from international standpoints and she basically dealt with independent filmmakers in the world context.

1.5 Research Methodology

Like my M.A. dissertation, here my study will also be conducted from ideological and subjective viewpoint.

“Ideology” was an aspect of “sensationalism”, i.e. eighteenth-century French materialism. Its original meaning was that of “science of ideas”, and since analysis was the only method recognized and applied by science it means “analysis of ideas”, that is, “investigation of the origin of ideas”.³

³ Durham, Meenakshi Gigi and Kellner, Douglas M. (eds.) *Media & Cultural Studies Key words*, Blackwell Publishers, 2001, pp. 44-5

While for Marx ideology referred to the ideological components of all bourgeois institutions and modes of production, recent film critics have rather followed Althusser for whom ideology is a series of representations and images, reflecting the conceptions of “reality” that any society assumes.⁴

Ideology enables men and women to make sense of their world and feel in control.⁵ An ideology is a system of ideas or beliefs and all media artifacts are the products of an ideology. The ideological position being put forward may be explicitly spelled out, as it is in religious tracks or political manifestos. But more often the ideology is implicit and has to be read into the text in order to find the ideology at work. The purpose of discovering the ‘ideology’ or ‘system of belief’ underlying a message is at the root of most forms of textual analysis: the purpose is to find the hidden meanings and values which may not be explicit on first reading. Thus, most method of analysis, like all method of production, are ‘ideological’ in that they are informed by systems of ideas and thinking whether the analysts are explicit about it or not. It is wholly impossible to do any kind of research without having an ideology. Ideology is to analyze what accent is to speak. There are often cases where the ideology of a piece of research is explicitly spelled out, usually in the case of oppositional or critical research. There isn’t a method called ‘ideological analysis’ – but any method can be used as a part of ideological project. One’s own ideology or point of view will be a part of the theory informing his/her hypothesis. Some scholars insist that there are particular ‘feminist’ or ‘Marxist’ methods, but Jane Stokes wrote in her/his book *Media &*

⁴ Kaplan, E. Ann. *Women and Film: Both sides of the camera*. Routledge, London and New York, 1993, p.12.

⁵ Braudy, Leo and Cohen, Marshal (eds.) *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 260

বাংলাদেশ ফিল্ম আর্কাইভের প্রকাশনা

১. রজতজয়ন্তী স্মারকগ্রন্থ, বাংলাদেশ ফিল্ম আর্কাইভ, ঢাকা ২০০৪।
২. বাংলাদেশের জনপ্রিয় ধারার চলচ্চিত্র ও সিনে সাংবাদিকতার আন্তঃপ্রভাব, অদिति ফাল্লুনি গায়েন ও হুমায়রা বিলকিস, ঢাকা, ২০০৯।
৩. বাংলাদেশের শিশুতোষ চলচ্চিত্র : একটি সমাজতাত্ত্বিক সমীক্ষা, তপতী বর্মন ও ইমরান ফিরদাউস, ঢাকা, ২০০৯।
৪. **Women on Screen : Representing Women by Women in Bangladesh Cinema, Bikash Ch. Bhowmick, Dhaka, 2009.**
৫. চলচ্চিত্রকার সালাহউদ্দিন, হারুনর রশীদ, ঢাকা, ২০০৯।
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৯. বাংলাদেশ ফিল্ম আর্কাইভ জার্নাল, ২য় সংখ্যা, ২০০৯।



বাংলাদেশ ফিল্ম আর্কাইভ