

# Locating the Re/presentation of the “Feminine Other”: 1970s – 1980s’ Popular Bangla Movie Songs as Gendered Discourses

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## Abstract

Bengali song titles like "চুমকি চলেছে একা পথে" (Chumki is Alone on the Way) to "নীল আকাশের নিচে আমি রাস্তায় চলেছি একা" (I'm Walking Alone under the Blue Sky) demonstrate how men are safe and free but women are unsafe if she's alone on a Bangladeshi road. Some song lyrics can be powerful media for infusing particular discourse into the audience's mind. Viewing and listening to famous Bengali movie songs is enjoyable but the problematics of the songs as gendered discourse are rarely addressed. According to the idea of “otherness as stereotype” from cultural theorist Stuart Hall's famous essay “The Spectacle of the Other” (1997), many Bengali songs demonstrate the connotations of gender binarism that stereotype women as the ‘other’. The mechanism of stereotyping considers Bengali women as the “fragmented other”, as film theorist Laura Mulvey discusses in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). The paper explores the fact that 1970s – 1980's Bangla movie songs reflect the male-dominated, stereotyped norms of the 1970s' Bangladeshi culture. The paper also analyzes how these selected song lyrics and their music videos represent women as the ‘feminine other’, or the gendered binary of men.

## Introduction:

### **Romantic Songs in the 1970s – 1980s’ Bangladeshi Media: Romance as Male Fantasy**

The use of songs in Bangladeshi films is not new phenomenon, yet it was especially 1960s when music became an integral part of Bangla cinema.

The popularity of songs in films roots back in 1960, which is also known as the “Golden Age of Cinema” in Bangladesh. The films in this era had “a brilliant balance of music and story” as music was “an essential part of storytelling” (Ashiq, 2020, p. 7). In the 1970s, unlike the 21<sup>st</sup> century internet culture of ‘new media’, Bangladeshi media had radio, black and white television and cinema. The first major breakthrough in music in an independent Bangladesh was the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendro (Free Bengal Radio Centre). In their article, “*From Few to Many Voices: An Overview of Bangladesh’s Media*”, Shoesmith and Mahmud mention that television “was expensive to set up and receivers were generally seen as far too expensive for the majority of people” (Shoesmith & Genilo, 2013, p. 57). Still, for both rural and urban people, radio and cinema were the available means of entertainment. In rural Bangladesh, one black and white television in a solvent family gathered the attention of the whole local community, whereas urban people collected tickets for those movies at cinema halls. In the 1970-80s Bangla film industry, there was a huge appeal of movie stars like Razzak (1942 – 2017), Kabori (1950 – 2021), Babita (1953 - ), Shabana (1953 - ), Bulbul Ahmed (1940 – 2010), Alamgir (1950 - ) and others. Shazu (2019) reports that among the male actors, “Farooque, Uzzal, Sohel Rana, Bulbul Ahmed, Javed and others made their movie debuts in the 70s”. Many movie songs caught the “public” sentiment of romance and ideal domesticity which, in reality, represented male ego, male power and male fantasy. It is important to note that the songs got popularized by a large part of male producers as well as the male audience. If someone googles the list of Bangla movie directors and songwriters on Wikipedia, s/he will observe that most of them, if not all, are men. The film industry was largely run by a network of the masculine communities. In the case of cast, Shishir and Shams (2017) observe that the leading heroines in 1970’s films were portrayed to be “devoted towards the male viewers” because “(the most of the viewers of Bangladeshi cinema are men)”. As for the music productions, the female playback singers like Shammi Akhtar (1957 – 2018), Sabina Yesmin (1954 - ), Runa Laila (1952 - ), Ferdousi Rahman (1941 - ), Shahnaz Rahmatullah (1952 – 2019) and others had to sing the songs written by male songwriters. Besides, the audience of those movies held traditional patriarchal values where women were often seen as the stereotyped “other” – the archetype of the caregiver, the emotional manager, the ideal wife, or the object of men’s desire, and so on. The movie songs were preoccupied with certain values, e.g. how women were “different” from men because of their biological and sociocultural vulnerability.

### **‘Otherness’ vis-à-vis Male Fantasy – Gender, Stereotype and Power: Theoretical Framework**

The present-time feminist media theory takes a feminist perspective towards media studies. Predominantly based on gender issues, feminist media theory explores how gender intersects with other dimensions of identity such as race, class, ability, nationhood, and sexual orientation, as well as with the relations of subordination or domination. Linda Steiner (2014) notes that feminist film theorists focus on how “structures and narrative strategies guided cinema spectatorship in gendered ways, thereby constructing “woman” as the Other.” (Fortner and Fackler, 2014, p. 361). The representation of women in popular media is chiefly performed by multidimensional cultural practices like stereotyping mechanisms. In this regard, Stuart Hall’s theorization of representation conceptualizes ‘otherness’ and explores how media represents certain people/ objects as “other”. Like stereotype, otherness too is an artificial construction that focuses on some particular traits, highlights them in media and normalizes those traits as natural identity. The process of ‘othering’ has a hegemonic, hierarchical and representational aim. Popular media captures certain feminine characteristics of women and magnifies those features, e.g. women being submissive, dependent on male counterparts, tearful, emotional, biologically insecure, unsafe etc. Thus media symbolically produces and reproduces the stereotyped image of femininity (oftentimes, ‘hyper-femininity’ in melodramatic Bangla movies). This construction of otherness holds power mechanisms – women and men are represented as two binary opposites, as if the ‘female other’ has no existence without its ‘male self’. Oftentimes, such selective feminine features are defined as ‘otherness’ in terms of men’s masculinity portrayed in the media. Hall (1997) writes, “Stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order [...] what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'Other', between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', Us and Them.” (p. 259). In this process, ‘otherness’ becomes subject to gross inequalities of power which is at the same time represented through the masculine agenda of movie songs and movie-making.

Hall also argues that “splitting” is one of the most important strategies for creating the other. This split psychology relates to poststructuralist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s conception of the ‘fragmented other’. In misrecognition phase of a child’s upbringing, the child’s self-image gets separated from his mother’s image. In this process, the child becomes the ‘other’ and enters the ‘symbolic order’ phase, which is essentially phallogocentric. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey borrows this concept of ‘symbolic order’ and claims that a woman stands in patriarchal culture “as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order” (Mulvey, 1989, p. 15). This is why the dominant cinema culture holds the male gaze in its production of language, lyrics, narratives, cinematography

and point of views. Naturally, the audience’s attention is directed to the ‘male self’ that likes to see the ‘feminine other’ as an inferior being, thus projecting male fantasy in media images. Thus the ‘feminine other’ actually serves as a partial representation of the event. According to Hall (1997),

The important point is that stereotypes refer as much to what is imagined in fantasy as to what is perceived as ‘real’. And, what is visually produced. By the practices of representation, is only half the story. The other half- the deeper meaning -lies in *what is not being said, but is being fantasized. What is implied but cannot be shown.* (p. 263)

This is the binary, the polarized form of representation that foregrounds women as the weak counterpart because men are the provider, the savior, and the superior. The song producers utilize this public sentiment (which holds the masculine point of view) for romantic songs to propagate the idea of “feminine other”, whose ultimate goal, in other words, is to strengthen the masculine self and to re-assert male consciousness. This paper takes Hall’s idea of ‘gender stereotype’ and Mulvey’s concept of ‘fragmented other’ and fuses these two ideas into ‘feminine other’.

### **Analysis of Movie Songs: The Lyrics and Their Visual Narratives**

Underneath the so-called narratives of love and romance, some Bangla movie songs conveyed the ‘otherness’ of a woman in different ways. Many romantic songs in the 1970s-1980s were rooted in the idea of women as biological means, or “biological essentialism”. Michael Ryan (2012) comments on the gendered cultural conditioning portrayed in media, “It is carried out in a patriarchal world anchored in biological imperatives that drive us toward survival” (p. 91). The song lyrics present such polarity of language and survival connotations of women under the Bangladeshi patriarchal social order. The cinematography of the music videos complements the song lyrics. The representation of the ‘feminine other’ takes a semiotic, or meaning-making approach. According to Baldwin (2014), “semiotics looks specifically at the relationship between texts and their underlying meanings (specifically, at social structures which they represent)”. Song producers tend to ‘fix’ a meaning or way of understanding as stereotyping includes fixation of the meaning into one ‘preferred meaning’. Studying the verbal narratives or song lyrics is as importance as analyzing the visual narratives of the songs because, “in music video, not only lyrics but also image and music shift roles” (Vernallis, 2002, p. 17). The meanings of the lyrics decipher the network of power relations working underneath these discourses. This paper uses Critical Discourse Analysis

(CDA) as a tool to analyze the heteronormative cultural dynamics in the verbal signs of the songs and the visual signs of the music video. CDA unveils the hegemonic gender stereotypes in media language that portray women as the “fragmented other”.

- i. “আমি তোমার বধু, তুমি আমার স্বামী” (I am your wife, you are my husband)



**Figure 1** : Two narrative sequences of the movie song “আমি তোমার বধু, তুমি আমার স্বামী”

This famous song composed by Alam Khan and sung by Shammi Akhter, is from the movie *Aradhona* (1979). The male gaze expects the wife to find her salvation in her husband. Here Rupa (Kabari) conforms to the phallocentric status of male superiority because she considers her husband Ashik (Bulbul

Ahmed) as a godlike figure – “খোদার পরে তোমায় আমি বড় বলে জানি” (to me, you are next to God). The audience sees the wife’s dedication towards her husband, which actually reveals her internalization of self-inferiority especially when she bends down to his feet to seek blessings. These certain repetitive acts and gestures of a ‘feminine image’, in Judith Butler’s theorization of gender, is seen as ‘gender performativity’ that constructs the feminine other “to perform, produce and sustain discrete and polar genders” (Butler, 1990, p. 190). Constant repetition of the media-scripted feminine roles makes the audience forget that gender is “learned”, not “given”. In the song narrative, Rupa acts according to heteronormative Islamic marriage vows of the Bengali community that ultimately gives Ashik more privilege over his female counterpart.

ii. “যদি বউ সাজো গো” (If You are Dressed as a Bride)



**Figure 2** : Two narrative sequences of the movie song “যদি বউ সাজো গো”

From the movie *Wada* (1972), this song introduces Hall's idea of fetishism and "male-centered fantasy". It shows how a man defines a woman's beauty by marrying her. In the song narrative, Masud (Bulbul Ahmed), the hero, sings that being a bride would make Aysha (Bobita) more beautiful than she already is. Aysha cheerfully agrees with Masud, "বলো বলো আরও বলো, লাগছে মন্দ নয়" (tell me more and more, I love hearing it all). The woman's patronization of male desire unveils gender theorist Adrienne Rich's conception of "male identification" - "the act whereby women place men above women, including themselves, in credibility, status, and importance..." (Rich, 1980, p. 43). Male identification happens when women identify their own wishes in terms of men's desires. Even the female audiences identify themselves according to the masculine nature of the narrative. The song lyrics hold the voyeuristic pleasure of the male gaze. Aysha is represented as the archetype of the ideal Bengali bride who acts shy, sweet and submissive.

iii. "চুমকি চলেছে একা পথে" (Chumki is Alone on the Way)



**Figure 3 :** Four narrative sequences of the movie song "চুমকি চলেছে একা পথে"



This apparently famous song from the movie *Dost Dushman* (1977) can be considered as a passive tale of harassment. Through playful melody, this song narrates the heroine’s loss of personal freedom. Chumki (Shabana), driving a cart, is safe by herself till Raja (Wasim) runs after her, as if it is natural for a man to intrude on a woman’s personal space. At some point, Raja takes away Chumki’s whip and sings, “ও টাঙ্গেওয়ালি, হাত করো খালি / চাবুক রেখে আমার হাত ধরো, সেই ভালো” (Oh Tonga wali, free up your hand and hold my hand, it’s better this way). This visual sign asserts a man’s attempt of taming the woman till she becomes his possession. The visual narrative reflects patriarchal codes and conducts where a man is expected to ‘save’ the ‘unsafe’ damsel in distress despite her being okay within her own comfort zone. Furthermore, this false representation of a woman’s vulnerability unfolds the media politics of normalizing certain gender roles. This song represents a gendered regime of representation, that, a lonely woman needs a man, not her individuality.

iv. “ও চোখে চোখ পড়েছে যখুনি” (When I cast my Look in your Eyes)





**Figure 4 :** Two narrative sequences of the movie song “ও চোখে চোখ পড়েছে  
যখুনি”

This song is chosen from the famous Bangla movie *Ananto Prem* (1977). The song “O chokhe chokh poreche jokhuni” is written by Gazi Mazharul Anwar and composed by Azad Rahman. From the song title, it is evident that this song involves Laura Mulvey’s theorization of ‘scopophilia’, or the pleasure of looking. Scopophilia is associated with “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey, 1989, p. 16). In this song, the female body is visually fetishized to represent the heroine’s sexual otherness. The woman in love is termed by several dictions that denote patriarchal values of love; e.g. “কলঙ্কিনী” (the stigmatized woman), “বিরহিনী” (the woman with unrequited love), “অভাগিনী” (the ill-fated woman) – all of them give a negative connotation to represent the loss of her bodily chastity. Razzak’s lines “এই যৌবনে কেউ না এলে কাছে / এত রূপের কি দাম বল আছে গো” (What value does your beauty have unless you find a lover in your youth?) convey the masculine point of view regarding feminine beauty. Fetishism, according to Hall, is a powerful tool for stereotyping. Fetishism involves the strategy of disavowal, or, “a powerful fascination or desire (that is) both *indulged* and at the same time *denied*” (Hall, 1997, p. 267). Fetishism has a sexual aim where women become “to-be-looked-at-ness” in front of the passive, male onlookers. In this segment, Babita’s saree is shown partly hanging by her shoulder, and in other scene her hands are pressed onto her chest. These visual actions make her an object of male fetishism. The cinematographer’s strategic disavowal of her feminine body parts makes Razzak the savior, the protector of his sensitive ‘feminine other’.

v. “আমি রজনীগন্ধা ফুলের মত গন্ধ বিলিয়ে যাই” (Like a Tuberose Flower, I Spread Fragrance)



**Figure 5 :** Four narrative sequences of the movie song “আমি রজনীগন্ধা ফুলের মত গন্ধ বিলিয়ে যাই”

Here in the song is taken from the movie *Rajanigandha* (1982). The phraseology of this song is noteworthy along with its music video. Phraseology, according to Gries (2008), is “the co-occurrence of a form or a lemma of a lexical item and one or more additional linguistic elements of various kinds which function as one semantic unit in a clause or sentence” (p. 6). Sudha (Shabana) represents her femininity by certain similes and metaphors, such as “রজনীগন্ধা ফুলের মত” (like tuberose flower), “মেঘে ঢাকা চাঁদের মত” (like the moon hidden behind the clouds) and “কাঁটা” (thorns). The phraseology of the lyrics suggests the heroine’s self-objectification as an entertaining agent. These flower and moon imageries reflect the softness and submissiveness of women. The song, passively upholds the theme of women as the silent bearers of pain and their self-sacrifice is necessary to sustain the (patriarchal) social privilege. In the song, Sudha, apparently happy, keeps entertaining her male audience where the men are seen sitting and looking at her with pride and ego. This scenario brings forth Laura Mulvey’s argument on the passive ‘female other’ who “performs within the narrative; the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude” (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19). In other words, Sudha’s presence compliments the narratives of the men’s world. In Mulvey’s opinion, the audience also participates in the male stars’ “fetishistic scopophilia”. The ‘feminine other’ turns into an object of fetishistic voyeurism.

vi. “মনে বড় আশা ছিল” (I had this Desire in my Heart)



**Figure 6 :** Three narrative sequences of the movie song “মনে বড় আশা ছিল”

Derived from the movie *Choto Maa* (1982), this song portrays how the ‘feminine other’ finds completeness when her male counterpart asks her to sing a song. This song upholds the male fantasy of fulfilling a woman’s life by marrying her. Ruma (Kabori) sings, “ধন্য তোমার জন্য আমার নারী হয়ে জন্ম নেয়া / ভাগ্য গুনে তোমার মত স্বামী পাওয়া” (My femininity finds meaning because of you, I am blessed to have you as my husband). Not only that, while holding her husband Rashed’s (Bulbul Ahmed) hand in a pleasing manner, she sings that she aspires to lead her life according to his wishes: “মন যুগিয়ে চলতে পারি” (...so that I can please you). These lines infuse inside the audience’s mind the masculinist norms of standardizing a woman’s values in the song narrative. Ruma’s physical gestures unveil the fact that a wife’s sacred duty is to be the pleaser and the entertainer, which actually fulfills the male need of exhibiting their own ego through media images. These scripted acts of a woman pleasing a man normalize the discourses of gender roles. The audience is convinced of the sacred duty of the ‘feminine other’. Furthermore, Ruma’s bodily actions operate as “body politic” – that is, female body happens to be the carrier of male fantasy of

love, care and submission. The audience, too, engages in this crude competition of voyeurism for the other. Evidently, the female spectator is absent in the song narrative even though the song is sung by a female singer.

vii. “কথা বল না বল ওগো বন্ধু, ছায়া হয়ে তবু পাশে রইব” (Whether You Talk to me or not, I’ll be Staying beside you like a Shadow)



**Figure 7 :** Three narrative sequences of the movie song “কথা বল না বল ওগো বন্ধু ,ছায়া হয়ে তবু পাশে রইব”

This song, chosen from the movie *Modhu Milan* (1970), depicts the sadistic male gaze that feeds upon a woman’s misery. The wailing Mina (Shabana) embodies the loss of female agency. The eroticization of a woman’s helplessness has been an interesting media strategy to uphold the man’s self-importance. The ‘feminine other’s grief, in search of the man’s kindness, indirectly strengthens male pride. Along with Mina, the audiences identify themselves in terms of male identification and the masochistic pattern of Bengali women’s tolerance of pain. Mina sings to Arif (Razzak) - “আমি অভাগিনী, শুধু যে তোমারই/ যতই ব্যথা দেবে সহিবো” (I am helplessly yours, I’ll bear all the pain you give me). Here, the female cast’s self-image is shaped by masculine order of sadism. This binary of male sadism, however, is represented in the woman’s masochism. It conveys to the audience the message that a woman stays with her husband despite all disrespect and portrays women as the sole absorber of male pride and ego. Oftentimes, it becomes the audience’s demand to see a woman sacrifice herself in order to restore greater peace. In the narrative and lyrics of this song, Arif silently

watches Mina whereas she tearfully tries to win him back. This side upholds women's internalization of self-inferiority as the 'feminine other' of men.

### Media, Gender and Beyond

Songs, as popular media, shape culture, gender and personhood, because, a song also serves as verbal rhetoric that carries certain ideologies. Critics Becca Cragin and Wendy Simons claim that "cultural studies can provide the feminist study of gender with a framework for analyzing in detail the content of cultural production while leaving it anchored to the social system from which it originates" (Chafetz, 2006, p. 196). Media images normalize the most mundane aspects of personal or cultural life and represent this inequality between 'masculine self' and 'feminine other'. The reason behind women's 'otherness' in Bangladeshi media was largely related to women's lived experiences as well. Especially, the representation of a rural woman was inspired by her educational, social and economic position in society. Lack of female empowerment, poverty, loss of father, low social position of father/family etc shaped her self-image as the 'inferior other' of her male counterpart. In the media, men are the proprietor of the "spectacle" who wants to see a "feminine other" for their own ego and identity formation. Not only the 1970s – 80s Bengali movie songs hold this focus of Stuart Hall's 'otherness', it is relevant to twenty-first century contemporary Bangla songs as well. For example, in a song from the movie *Valobasha Dibi Kina Bol* (2009), Shakib Khan sings to Apu Biswas, "দেখবে সেদিন আমি বদলে যাব ,যেদিন বধূবেশে তোমাকে পাব" ( I'll change myself the day I'll have you dressed as a bride). These lyrics highlight a man's need of his 'female other' in shaping his 'good boy' image. However, keeping aside a few of the exceptions, most of the media representation in Bangladeshi music industry stereotypes women as the subject of a gendered sociocultural regime.

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