Heroes and Villains: Masculinities of Romance, Dominance and Violence in Bangladeshi Films of 1970s

Arpana Awwal*

Abstract
This paper explores some of the performative templates of masculinity of heroes and villains in Bangladeshi cinema through the study of two film texts, Noyon Moni (1976, dir. Amjad Hossain) and Rongbaj (1973, dir. Zohirul Haq). Touching on “patriarchy’s scopic regime” (Ranjan, 2006, 1102) of the social and political situation in which the films were produced, the paper aims to critically examine the representation of the relationship between the heroes/ villains and the heroines/female characters of the popular Bangla cinema of the 1970’s. The turbulent times of the 70s in Bangladesh were crucial to the film industry, as it was in others sectors of the newly formed Bangladesh, in respect to re-envisioning a new form of expression that reflected the ideologies unique from the nation’s past relation with India and Pakistan. The first register, Noyon Moni (1976) belongs to the social familial genre that depicts the conflict between old and new networks of social relationships. It questions superstition, religious debauchery and patriarchal values where ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ play out their continuous confrontations and negotiations with each other. Rongbaj (1973) marks a change in the genre map of Bangladeshi cinema as the first action film. The paper looks at a new form of masculinity gaining rapid popularity and making certain gendered notions of violence and compliance normative.

Keywords: Bangladeshi cinema, 1970s, masculinity, social film, action film

Introduction
The unrealistic and spectacular image of Ananta Jalil holding his torn-out heart from his bleeding chest as a gesture of love in Nisshartho Bhalobasha (What is Love?) (2013, dir. Ananta Jalil) leaves no doubt in the audience’s mind about how far the heroes of Bangladeshi cinema have come. His six-packed body, an image not unfamiliar in Western or Eastern cinema, is a recent addition to the Dhaliwood spectacle of the hero. The trajectory of the heroes of Bangladeshi cinema to the more contemporary image of Anata Jalil reveals a nuanced understanding of how these images are products of social, cultural, political, and most importantly economic conditions, which also shape notions of romance, dominance and violence of predominant male characters in relation to female characters on the celluloid screen in Bangladesh.

This paper explores some of the performative templates of masculinity of heroes and villains in Bangladeshi cinema through the study of two film texts, Noyon

* Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Bangladesh, arpanaawwal@gmail.com
Moni (1976, dir. Amjad Hossain) and Rongbaj (1973, dir. Zohirul Haq). Touching on “patriarchy’s scopic regime” (Ranjan, 2006, 1102) of the social and political situation in which the films were produced the paper aims to critically examine the representation of the relationship between the heroes/ villains and the heroines/female characters of the popular Bangla cinema of the 1970’s. The turbulent times of the 70s in Bangladesh were crucial to the film industry, as it was in others sectors of the newly formed Bangladesh, in respect to re-envisioning a new form of expression that reflected the ideologies unique from the nation’s past relation with India and Pakistan. The first register, Noyon Moni (1976) belongs to the social familial genre that depicts the conflict between old and new networks of social relationships. It questions superstition, religious debauchery and patriarchal values, where ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ play out their continuous confrontations and negotiations with each other. Rongbaj (1973) marks a change in the genre map of Bangladeshi cinema as the first action film. The paper looks at a new form of masculinity gaining rapid popularity and making certain gendered notions of violence and compliance normative.

According to Lindsay Harlan’s definitions, the concepts of heroes and heroines in South Asia are informed by the diverse religions of the region.

The term hero and heroine encompass many types of human and superhuman beings in South Asian cultures, including some who are admired, some who are venerated and perhaps approached for help or intercession, and some who are literally worshiped as deities. … In the Hindu context, the Sanskrit word vira (Hindi, vir), which means “hero” and also “man”, conveys the idea that the hero is a paradigmatic or perfect man. (Harlan, 2003, p. 282)

It is worth noting here that the use of the word vira to mean both hero and man makes being a man synonymous with heroism. Unlike vir, a word encoded with bravery, the female counterpart in Hindu ideology was more popularly referred to as sati, not virangana, sati being a word associated with fidelity, submission and sacrifice: “Women who fought in battle and who subsequently died on their husband’s pyres are worshiped as ancestral satis rather than as heroines (viranganas).” (Ibid, p.282). The Mughal invasion of the Indian subcontinent had a colossal effect on the popular imagination of a hero for the converted Muslims in Bengal. The socio-cultural changes of the populace through religious conversions and cultural adaptations nuanced how masculinity was understood in Bengal. According to Harlan, for the Muslim the hero was a martyr or a pir (teacher) or both. A new form of vir or hero became necessary for the group of converted different from their old religious beliefs. Ahmed Sofa notes that for the newly converted Bengali Muslims heroes came in the guise of varied versions of Muslim religious personas like Hazrat Muhammed, Hazret Ali, Bibi Fatima, Hasan- Hossain, Rustam. Since the local scribes had little or no knowledge of Arabic or Persian, their versions of puthi (religious manuscript) relied largely on hearsay and imagination. Thus, the new hero was a combination of the existing cultural notions of masculinity and historical Islamic heroes (Sofa, 2009, p. 17).

During the English colonization of the Indian subcontinent a new class of masculinity was found desirable with the emergence of the Hindu Bengali middle class. The new Bhadralok masculinity was defined by modernity, education and breaking away from older structures. Bengali Muslim identity, on the other hand, has
been etched out in detail in different discourses on the origin of Islam in Bengal (Roy, 1983; Eaton, 1996). The syncretic nature of the identity within the sociocultural and economic pattern of Bengal became the point of contestation about its validity. The nineteenth-century Bhadralok of Bengal questioned the conjunction of Islam with Bengali identity, for the Bengali identity was understood synonymously with the larger Hindu identity. Curiously though, the Muslims of Bengal who considered themselves Ashraf did not imagine the Muslim identity of Bengal on the same line. By separating themselves on the question of foreign lineage, following similar arguments as the Bhadralok, they questioned the very Muslim-ness of Atrafs (Chatterji, 2014). Out of many other denominators, Ashraf and Bhadralok masculinities took formative shape around the abject agrarian village-based Bengali Muslim masculinity and the politically invisible identity of Bengali Muslim women. On the face of the educated Bhadralok and Ashraf’s disavowal, a political identity of the Bengali Muslim began to take shape. The dichotomous relation between the educated Bhadralok masculinity versus the laboring lower class Bengali Muslim masculinity, or the elite Ashraf masculinity versus the laboring lower class Atraf masculinity, was disrupted by a new masculinity that took shape by the early twentieth century. The emergence of the new masculinity in East Bengal was characterized as educated, politically aware and engaged, and deeply rooted in its relation to laboring agrarian rural society. The point of interest here is how the identity came into being through particular utterance, in this instance through bio-political discourses. In the introduction of Excitable Speech (1997) Judith Butler, in a very sophisticated argument, puts forth the idea that an identity comes into existence through speech act, which means that only when there is an available vocabulary or discourse that can give a figural shape to an identity it begins to exist. At the same time the abject, which is “the liminal state that hovers on the threshold of the body and body politics” (McClintock, 1995, p. 72), became a point of the emergence of the Bengali Muslim masculinity in negation to what the Muslims considered un-Islamic and bhadralok considered non-Bengali. From these two negations, the struggle to form a distinctive Bengali Muslim masculinity began to emerge as a political marker (Chatterji, 2014).

Gradually, by the early twentieth century this new brand of masculinity began to refute both the Bengali-Hindu cultural modernity that recognized the Bengalis as Hindus and the pro-Arab pan-Indian Muslim identity that undermined the cultural and linguistic identities of this group. They felt affinity with their cultural root, their Bengali-ness, principally and visibly expressed through Bangla language, as well as with their religious affiliation that is indigenized Islam. In this way, by the beginning of the twentieth century a category called Bengali Muslim came under discussion (Raju, 2008, p. 128). Following Butler’s argument on constitutive processes of an identity, it is possible to argue that the formation of new Bengali-Muslim identity raises interesting questions regarding popular understandings of identity as fixed and unyielding. What this identity does in its effort to legitimize itself is that it poses a paradoxical question to the essential nature of any geocultural or historical identity as static, and reveals the performative nature of any form of identity. The geographical separation of the two wings of Pakistan symbolically presented the racial segregation of the Bengalis in the east and dominant Punjabis in the west. The feminization of Bengali Muslims resurfaced in the political debates on the question of language in the newly formed two winged Pakistan (Uddin, 2006). The new debate brought to the fore old predilections in new vocabulary. General Ayub Khan’s observation about the
Bengalis of East Pakistan revealed a racist conviction when he claimed:

“East Bengalis…probably belong to the very original Indian races, … they have been and still are under considerable Hindu culture and linguistic influence…They have all the inhibitions of downtrodden races…Their popular complexes, exclusiveness, suspicion and …defensive aggression…emerge from this historical background.”

(Jahan, 2005, p. 70).

During these conflicts of culture, economy and language divide, the crisis that all these melted down to was of identity, which found its expression in the War of Liberation in 1971. The west versus the east or more specifically modern customs versus traditional norms became major signifiers during these times. On the celluloid screen we can see that this binary became a major trope in Bangla cinema during the 60s.

The plot and characters of the 70s corresponded very much with those in the 60s. In a time of monumental uprising against social inequality, we can see that the heroes of the celluloid screens of the 60s were vested with moral and traditional virtues as opposed to uncertain western ways. Heroes were the epitomes of what was culturally thought of as ethical and virtuous. He would represent the morals and simple sincere ways of a good village boy who was intelligent and brilliant in studies and looking for a decent occupation. In short, this chivalric character was the personification of the village-based spectator’s imagination of desirable masculinity: educated, moral, self-esteemed and rooted to his traditions. Chiefly this masculinity was the fantasy formation derived from the heroic morality of the social activists and freedom fighters of the national revolutions of the 60s and 70s. Manas Kumar Chowdhury contends that the transition of Bangladeshi familial hero of the 1960s to a hero with a social consciousness and increasingly violent in nature in the later decades can be traced to the nine-month bloody liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. In the following sections in the film texts one can see the nuanced versions of the above-discussed tropes of Bengali Muslim masculinities played out.

**Noyon Moni (1976): Masculinities as Modes of Oppression and Subversion**

The plot of Noyon Moni (1976, dir. Amjad Hossain) centers on the ways religion and superstitions have been apparatuses of control and oppression of the common by the dominating class. Just after Noyon’s birth, his father threw him out with his mother. His birth was considered ominous as it coincided with their house catching fire and his father being arrested for black marketeering food rations meant for free distribution amongst the poor. Noyon returns to his village as a young man with the aim to liberate the village from the grips of superstitious beliefs and religious oppression. The film frames his actions within a masculine narrative where his lover Moni becomes the cause of his revolutionary acts.

In *Noyon Moni* the central antagonist is Morol (village head) who represents oppression, debauchery, social evils, superstitions and subjugation of norms through religious manipulation. Morol also stands for all the oppressive social classes like Talukdar (landlords like zamindars), Matbor (village leader), Majutdar (hoarders/ black marketeers) who use every means of what Louise Althusser refers to as Ideological State Apparatus and Repressive State Apparatus to exercise power. The film was produced at a time when the Liberation War of ’71 was still a recent history.
In questioning the power of Morol, the film questions the rational of religion to annex diverse cultures and disparate geographies under the national boundary of Pakistan. By disavowing the Morol, the film attempts to purge the new nation from any traces of its religio-colonial memory. An example of the manipulation of Islam is shown through Morol’s justification of practicing polygamy. Morol preaches the sanction of polygamy in Islam while omitting the historical context and specific conditions that allowed such practice. He further pursues a fourth marriage with the village belle Moni. Through this instance the film problematizes the issue of patriarchal polygamy exercised especially in rural Bangladesh where the practice was an indicator of the social standing of a man. His Muslim masculinity was projected as his ability to provide for many wives and children. The film deploys Morol’s character as a referent of some of the common stereotypes of post-independent Bangladesh.

By having a Baul providing shelter to the newborn Noyon and his mother, the film proposes a return to the more syncretic nature of religion of the erstwhile East Bengal. Noyon’s masculinity can be read as an agential extension of the Baul’s humanist social approach. In stark opposition to Morol, the film positions Noyon as the new generation of liberal and rational thinking citizen. Morol calls Noyon and his friends ‘comunist’ (communist) by which the prevalent notion of communism associated with anti-religion, anti-tradition and agitation is reflected. His criticism of Noyon and his friends’ Jatra-group as non-Islamic and the call to reject it stand for his fear of their power to question his authority. Morol’s scorn of communism is an important point of reference in Bangladesh’s post-independence politics. Rouaq Jahan notes that despite his charisma, Sheikh Mujib’s government did not enjoy unanimous support of all political groups in Bangladesh. The leadership of Mukti Bahini (freedom fighter) was the first to question the Bangladesh Awami League government’s legitimacy in power as most of its political leaders were in exile during the nine months’ war. The second set of opposition came from the different factions of leftist political parties that criticized the government for the economic devaluation and perpetual rise of price of daily goods. It is important to note here that many of the leftists were part of the Mukti Bahini as well. Finally, the third opposition came from the right-wing groups who opposed the new secular mode of Bangladesh governance. The League government dealt with these oppositions by marking them as state enemies. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman branded the right-wing groups as Razakar (collaborators with the Pakistani forces), while the leftist groups and leaders of Mukti Bahini were branded as Naxalites or communist terrorists (2005). In the film, the right-wing oppression is visualized through the Morol and the potential to question its legitimacy is represented through the ‘comunists’.

The symbolic battle between good and evil – Morol and Noyon – is visualized through two signifiers: an ancient tree that is believed to be the abode of a powerful djinn and Moni who is supposedly possessed by the djinn.

Figure 1: A scene from the film Noyon Moni where Morol is shown hitting Moni to prevent her from revealing that he drugs her to coerce her into marriage.
By cutting the tree Noyon symbolically uproots all local superstitions and fallacies. Simultaneously, Noyon uproots Morol and replaces his own masculinity in the position of power. At the end, by rescuing Moni he seals his manhood as her protector and legitimate suitor.

While the film preaches a certain modernity for a newly formed nation, it contradicts its own agenda by naturalizing other forms of oppression. Noyon’s relation to women is paradoxical. While he is a benevolent son to his mother, his relationship with Moni is clearly one of abusive power and control. There is a similarity between both of Monis’s suitors – Noyon and Morol. Both Noyon and Morol use violence on her body as a means of taming or submitting her to their will. The film establishes two forms of violence played out on the female body.

Romantic films celebrate violence on women by distinguishing it from bad violence exercised by antagonists. ‘Good violence’ is normalized through the hero’s action that is to tame the heroin into social norms and femininity, or simply to ‘bring her to her senses’. Srividya Ramasubramaniam and Beth Oliver refer to S. Derne’s work to suggest that “these films conveyed the notion that force and physical aggression were legitimate means of expressing love” (2006, 212). While the authors focus on physical violence, it is also the psychological or emotional violence, which is portrayed as normal and anticipated in a romantic relationship, as expressions of love and with good intentions. There is a manner in which the women are infantilized by enforcing the idea that women at large fail to understand their own good until violence is used.

Most often these forms of violence in normative heterosexual romantic relationships are not only normalized but idealized as well. This is evident in one of the song sequences in which Noyon is seen awaiting Moni. When Moni finally arrives Noyon pulls her by the hair in anger. In the next shot Moni turns towards Noyon with a romantic and appeasing smile. The song sequence establishes violence in romantic relationship as acceptable expression of love and concern. Moni’s reaction to the violence prescribes an expected reaction. By this it can be said that it is the women whose act of accepting one form of violence in opposition to another distinguishes between good and bad violence.

Active masculinity and passive femininity
Moni is shown bearing the guilt of Noyon’s exile and as an attempt of redemption plays along with the myth of the *djinn* (or genie) and madness as means of keeping suitors at bay. In a way, the madwoman image empowers Moni by not burdening her with social expectations that any village girl would otherwise be. Fearing the *djinn* that has supposedly possessed her, nobody questions
her actions or whereabouts. Thus, her ‘djinned’ state or madness becomes her instrument of practicing freedom and her refuge from social role. The djinned state of the body, I contend, is the form that resists what Butler terms gender performance. Hence, the use of the djinn metaphor then becomes a means of debunking myths of femininity and “female hysteria” which is commonly associated with djinn. By showing Morol using drug and violence over a long period of time in the name of curing Moni from the possession to actually coerce her into marrying him, the film frames Moni’s hysteria within a visual rhetoric that allows for the audience to interrogate the credibility of such gender centric illness.

The final episode of the film is the abduction and rescue of Moni. The constant threat of bodily horror impending on Moni finally resurfaces when Morol abducts her. The episode is a stunning exhibition of feminine passivity in contrast to masculine agency. While Moni screams and whines and cries during the entire episode, the whole flock of village men come together to rescue the village belle. This patriarchal discourse establishes the female body as a vulnerable site. The subject boundary of the female body is in constant threat of being violated through physical and sexual violence. Such constructions always risk the spectator’s identification and recognition with the narrative’s male agency, which categorizes the female body as susceptible. By this, I do not suggest that any linear or eventual form reaction from the spectator, but such representations always a risk enforcing stereotyped notions around the female body. This is a repeated trope in films that I discuss further in the next section.

Noyon Moni is a representative of the social familial films in its final phase. Noyon represents the communal affiliation very close to the one formed during the Language Movement in the 50s and 60s leading to the War of Liberation in 1971. By setting the film diegetic in a society where institutions of law and justice are corrupt, the film calls for social changes through communal brotherhood. With the shift of popularity from social films to action films, especially in the ’80s, one can notice a marked shift from this communal hero towards a masculinity that was sought in the physical strength of a singular protagonist. Violent action scenes motivated by personal revenge narratives controlled the action genre.

Another way male masculinity is rationalized concerns its contrarian relationship with female insanity. While Moni is the hapless ‘insane’ possessed woman, Noyon is the rational man. In Bangladesh, most often women’s madness is culturally connected with being possessed by the supernatural being, djinn. Here as well the womb as a gender marker is active in framing this assumption. Common superstitions reveal how the woman’s body is tied to prohibitions that act as social regulatory system for conservative Bengali Muslim women. In a way, Moni symbolizes the nation. Ridding the village of the tree which abodes the djjin, Noyon also releases Moni aka the nation from the power of superstitions exercised and imposed by with a group of people.

Rongbaj (1973): Toxic Masculinities
Rongbaj (1973) is an important marker in the history of Bangladeshi cinema. The first of its kind, the action film gained vast popularity and paved the way for action film genre in Bangladesh. Unlike its contemporaries, or predecessors, the film’s hero is a good example of how a new form of masculinity was being brought into the fore and
made popular. The word ‘rongbaj’ refers to a person of lower class with traits of fraudulence, immorality and violence, a local goon. And rongbaji is understood as the immoral activities of a rongbaj. What is significant for this paper is how such traits are popularized and justified through the heroes’ action. Raja, the protagonist and rongbaji in the film, is a contradictory mix of positive and negative masculinity. Raja’s larger than life infamy is established at the very beginning of the film before he appears on screen. He is introduced through the terror and hatred expressed by the slum dwellers.

The first scene of the film introduces the major theme of the film, masculinity’s relation with power, control and violence. The way the first action scene shows Raja fighting another goon who is trying to take control of an area gives an impression that the fight symbolizes good against bad, where in fact Raja is no better than the other goons in the film. Raja lives by picking pockets on the roads. On one occasion Raja steals a wallet from Jahed who is already going through monetary crisis. Raja finds a letter in the wallet that informs him about Jahed’s financial crisis. While he feels sorry for the man, his friend makes him realize the reality of their everyday activities that may have similar consequences. By showing Raja’s guilt the film tries to project Raja in a positive light that separates him other characters in negative roles. Later in the film he is shown explaining to his girlfriend Chini how he was left an orphan at a very young age by the death of his parents. The film provides a background for the justification of Raja’s misdeeds by explaining that Raja had no guardian to teach him right from wrong. He is shown as a victim and product of the social depravity. As the story unfolds, Raja realizes that he is the cause of Jahed and Shireen’s misery. Jahed’s distress at losing his wallet results in mistakes in his work that costs him his job. His wife Shireen becomes a part of the narrative when Raja takes refuge in her house after being chased by a crowd who catch him stealing. At one point in the film’s narrative Raja is hired by Jahed’s landlord to throw Jahed and Shireen out because they are unable to pay rent. In the rest of the film Raja is shown trying to help Jahed and Shireen out of their misery.

Problematic masculinities
Similar to Brenda Coopers analysis of Boys’ Don’t Cry, Rongbaj “raises serious questions regarding the assumptions of naturalness and virtue inherent in traditional definitions of heterosexual manhood and its privileges” (Cooper, 2002, p. 51). Raja’s masculinity is not only unnatural, strange and lacking in virtue, but a serious threat to society. Raja’s tendency to engage in fights everywhere is shown as unproblematic through the narrative’s natural flow. When a businessman commissions Raja to deal with another goon who tries to extort money from him because he owns an illegal business, Raja agrees to take care of the situation. While the film is trying to promote a Robin Hood-like character, the character itself is contradictory. The irony lies in the fact that Raja is trying to stop the goons from rongbaji in exchange for a payment. In addition, he is saving a man engaged in illegal business. What Raja’s character tries to portray is a masculinity that takes over power and control codified with men. This is contrasted with Jahed’s masculinity that is portrayed as wanting. Out of job, he is forced to sell his wife’s jewelry. His masculinity is further questioned when his wife laments being childless. Not being able to live up to a desired masculinity, Jahed leaves home, only to return after his waning masculinity is restored in finding a job. Jahed is responsible, moral and kind. However, throughout the film he is characterized as weak, helpless and not in control of his situation. In opposition to
Raja, his masculinity is portrayed as undesirable and his humane weaknesses as unmanly.

**Woman and masculinity**
A critical look at the protagonist reveals a problematic concept of hero that was taking shape through injections of patriarchal values and gender bigotry. Raja’s love affair with Chini sheds more light on the problematic masculinity promoted by Raja’s character. While Chini is portrayed as independent and strong, her masculinity falls short in the presence of Raja. During an episode where men and women of the slum wait in queue for their turn to collect water from a communal tap, Chini forces her way to the front of the line threatening anyone who tries to stop her. When Raja arrives in the scene and finds Chini at fault he asks her to leave and she does so without any protest. When promoting the masculinity of men in the film, the film’s diegetic is an interesting example of Judith Halberstam’s suggestion that “suppression of female masculinities allows for male masculinity to stand unchallenged as the bearer of gender stability and gender deviance” (Cooper B. , 2002, p. 45).

Furthermore, “Tomboyism generally describes an extended childhood period of female masculinity” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 5). Since Chini’s masculinity fails in front of Raja’s she could be understood as in a state of tomboyism. Chini’s tomboyism can be “associated with a “natural” desire for the greater freedoms and motilities enjoyed by boys. Very often it is read as a sign of independence and self-motivation,” (p. 6). Chini’s tomboyism is shown as peculiar and undesirable but rationalized when the viewers come to realize the absence of a mother who could have “remodeled (her) into compliant forms of femininity” (p. 6). Halberstam continues that “even a cursory survey of popular cinema confirms, the image of the tomboy can be tolerated only within a narrative of blossoming womanhood,” Chini’s passage to womanhood is shown through her love affair with Raja in which she tries to make him a better man and herself a woman.

The ability to provide for family is essentially linked to masculinity. While Jahed is looking for a job, Raja requests Chini to quit her work. Chini’s initial outright refusal gradually leads to the suggestion of marriage. She says she will happily give up the work that pays for her ailing father’s medication if Raja is willing to take the responsibility. Chini’s ability to provide partially for her family is not highlighted in the film, nor it is shown as a crisis moment like Jahed’s when Raja asks her to quit. Instead the film shows women’s willingness to succumb to a submissive role, while men take the lead.

Raja’s relation with Shireen takes a turn out of guilt for Shireen’s misery. Raja begins to consider her a sister and a maternal figure. This relationship serves the purpose of satisfying Shireen’s desire for motherhood and Raja’s desire for a mother. While Radha Chakravarty suggests that surrogate motherhood has the power to become “the site for the articulation of the female desire to determine one's own identity, in confrontation with traditional inscriptions of the mother's body as a means of controlling female subjectivity” (Chakravarty, 1998, p. 77), in the film, Shireen’s motherhood is reduced to loving and caring, lacking in any form of agency. On the contrary, when her husband abandons her she begs Raja to take her in. While Raja becomes her savior, it is at the expense of Shireen’s dependent role.
Towards the end of the film, Shireen’s landlord tries to rape Chini as a revenge act on Raja. The constant attempt of rape necessitates that Raja come to the rescue and fulfill the role of a hero at the expense of Chini’s vulnerability. Similar to Moni in the film Noyon Moni, Chini’s body is shown vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence. Modeling women as weak and in constant threat of being defiled, the films promote the male masculine figure as the rescuer. Thereby films normalize the idea that women are not only unable to defend themselves or other women, they need and desire men to keep them safe.

The enemy
The villains of the 60s and 70s were everything opposed to the hero. He was immoral, businessman, rich, alcoholic, licentious and indecent. A simplistic relation between money and immorality through the characterization of villains was established in these films (Nasreen, p. 118). In Rongbaj there is no central antagonist; rather, men in different social positions are villains who exploit the lower class and women. To Chini’s suggestion of marriage, Raja exclaims that he will become one of the richest men. Chini responds in a sad tone, pleading Raja not to be a rich man but to be a gentleman. A relationship is drawn between richness and corruption and in binary to gentlemanliness. This could probably be traced to the once prevalent landownership system or Zamindar system in the subcontinent. The strong and distinct divide between the bourgeoisie and proletariat can be traced as the reason behind the strong aversion towards the rich. Though officially the Zamindar system was aborted in the 1951, the semiotic relationship between richness and its repressive ownership remained prevalent in the later cinemas (Ahmed, p. 24). In Rongbaj the rich, immoral, alcoholic and licentious villain is Sohel, employer of Chini’s father. He fits the role by attempting sexual assault on Chini. Raja’s reacts with a couple of punches and a few kicks. As the film promotes such form of masculine boldness it fails to question the validity of such short-term resolution. Thus, these films do not promote any constructive solution to rapid growing social crises, but rather are replete in destructive tendencies.

At the end of the film Jahed is united with his wife and Chini waits till Raja’s release from prison. Raja’s imprisonment acts on different signifying levels. It unites Shireen with her husband. For the time being it gives control to Jahed who becomes Chini’s guardian in Raja’s absence. As a result it restores patriarchal hold over both the women. Secondly, its purges the protagonist of all previous accountabilities to come to an acceptable terms with the viewer’s perception of a hero. And finally, and most importantly, it purges the pleasure of visual violence the viewers have enjoyed in the film. Rongbaj as the first attempt to substitute the foreign action films illegally imported during the 70s was a huge commercial...
success. Steave Neal’s comment on Melville’s *Le Samurai* is equally true for *Rongbaj* “The film is by no means a critique of the male image it draws upon. On the contrary it very much identifies (invites us to identify) with Delon” (1993, p. 7) who is a lone gangster, a hitman.

**Conclusion**

The film industry’s heroes and villains have gone through many changes through the industry’s journey that began in 1957. Heroes of 60’s and 70’s were imaged as traditional simplistic middle-class men whose strict principals stood in a binary relation to the snob, arrogant elite villains. But what has not changed in the basic diegetic of Dhaliwood cinema is John Berger’s assertion that “men act, women appear” (1972, 47). Dalitwood films have played on the basic tropes of masculinity: as sexually active, as provider of the wife and offspring and protector of lover, family and the nation. These premises of masculinity unquestionably equate masculinity to the male body. Since cinema narratives thrive on the polarized stereotypes, which means for the diegetic flow it is necessary to produce the women as sexually passive, helpless, and victims to reinstate the patriarchal uneven symbiotic relation.

In both the films, *Rongbaj* and *Noyon Moni*, the romantic scenes are covert and suggestive rather than revealing. The camera pans away from the lovers once the lovers engage intimately or even in a kiss. In contrast, the scenes of sexual assaults or attempted rape are not covert. The absence of romantically intimate scenes confer to society’s taboo of such relationship out of marriage, or even in the case of married couples, the scenes are absent as private acts. On the other hand, the presence of violent acts on the women’s body is overtly eroticized. Bangladesh’s history is replete with mass rape on Bangladeshi women, which became such a huge concern that it became a part of every liberation war film narrative. Kaberi Gayan comments that though the first few film war narratives wanted to portray a sympathetic image of victims of rape, they failed to portray women as anything other than passive preys. Consequently rape scenes in later films were used for distorted visual pleasure in the name of history telling (2013). I argue elsewhere that women are constantly made to fear ‘losing’ their virginity as a means to confine them within patriarchal norms and control their mobility and actions. The concept of “virginity as a tool of gender politics that is less physiological and more cultural and political in the function of dominating the female gender” (Awwal, 2013, p. 28) is best projected in these films. If the repetitive trope of women as docile bodies whose boundaries can easily be penetrated or bent is meant to be read as narrative texts for mass consumption, we can easily see why it is of social concern.

When women on-screen do not protest to aggression perpetuated by the heroes in films, for example like Noyon on Moni and Raja on Chini, it naturalizes these forms of abuses as part of the relationship. Ramasubramaniam and Oliver’s comment on how different forms of sexual violence perpetuated by the heroes are made to be acceptable is worth mentioning:

“Heroes and villain differed in the types of sexual violence that they perpetrated. Heroes were more likely to perpetrate moderate crimes such as eve-teasing, sexual harassment, and domestic violence, whereas villains were more likely to perpetrate severe crimes including rape and eroticized murder… … furthermore, moderate sexual violence is often depicted in the context of fun and happiness, whereas severe sexual crimes are depicted as serious and dramatic. This pairing of fun with moderate
sexual violence implies that such crimes are not bad but enjoyable for all involved.”
(2006, p. 222)

To contest such naturalizing notions of masculinity and its relationship with women we need to strive for representations beyond dichotomy.

References


**Filmography**

Noyon Moni (1976) Director: Amjad Hossain  
Rongbaj (1973) Director: Zohirul Haq

---

1 Dhaliwood- Dhaka based film industry in Bangladesh  
2 John Broomfield first coined the title bhadralok in the 1960s to recognize a group of Hindu Bengalis who had acquired western manners, ways of thought and education. These bhadralok belonged from landowning families who did not labor, but lived on tax and produces from the land. Earlier in Bengal this class of non-laboring, landowning class was known as babu, babu also noted Hindu affiliation. Later the term babu also meant the bhadralok who had adapted to western way of life and taste in art, music and literature. For more read Joya Chatterji, *Bangla bhag holo: Hindu shampradayikota o desh bibhag, 1931-1947* (Dhaka: UPL 2014).  
3 Ashraf of undivided Bengal traced their lineage to Arab regions to mark a difference within the Muslim community, from the Bengali Muslims who were called Atraf. Joya Chatterji notes that the distinction between Ashraf and Atraf was not a very clear one, as many affluent Bengali Muslims took up the title later. Joya Chatterji, *Bangla bhag holo: Hindu shampradayikota o desh bibhag, 1931-1947* (Dhaka: UPL 2014).  
4 A heterogeneous group of mystic minstrel of Bengal.  
5 Jatra, meaning procession, is a form of regional theatre in the rural areas of Bengal and among the Bengali speaking neighboring areas. It is said to have come to existence as part of the Vaishnava devotional movement in the 16th century. Though originally meant for religious and moral teaching, that attracted the audience through songs, plays and dances; Jatra is also a performance of folk stories. (Brandon 2002)  
6 Multiple other assumptions with female gender and superstitions have existed traditionally in Bangladesh. Even during the ’90s menstruating women were especially discouraged from going outside the house particularly after sunset as local believes held that such physical condition makes the body vulnerable to djinn’s possession. Speaking from experience some of the many common prohibitions a woman in Bangladesh especially conservative middle-class, urban or rural grew up hearing was not to go outside the house during the evening maghrib azan (call from the mosque for Muslims for evening prayers) as it was supposed to be a time when djinns are usually mobile, or not to leave one’s hair open as it would attract djinn.