DISCURSIVE LEGITIMIZATION OF RAPE-DISCOURSE IN BANGLADESHI POPULAR CINEMA

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Abstract- The legitimization of rape-discourse in Bangladeshi popular cinema is literally unexplored. Until now, has been no study on rape in Bangladeshi popular cinema from a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective. Rape is a social taboo, yet it is not a subject that is avoided in popular Bangladeshi cinema. There is ample literature on rape in media, but hardly any on its treatment in cinema. This paper looks at whether certain discourse-ideological practices are being employed (sub)consciously to legitimize a monolithic rape-discourse ideology in mainstream cinema in an ever-increasing consumer-cultural society.

Index terms- cinematic rape in Dhallywood, Bangladeshi popular cinema, critical discourse analysis (CDA), legitimization of rape-discourse

I. CRITICAL IMPLICATION

Cinema, whether popular or alternative, tends to explore the treatment of rape in myriad ways, some focusing on the psychological aftermath of the victims of this heinous act while others on the physical violence and sadistic eroticism during the act itself, and a few on all such elements. There is plenty of literature exploring rape in media [see 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7], while there is hardly any on its treatment in cinema. This is one of the reasons which prompted Henry [8] to write Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre. Rape is a social taboo, and its implications can reflect upon how the victims are treated and perceived in society. Cinema is a powerful medium; hence, when employing the discourse of rape some people may not understand the intended or apparent meaning, and therefore might misread it in terms of its aberrant or unintended meaning. Consequently, the underlying ideology gets misconstrued. In an increasingly consumer-cultural society, it is important to explore whether certain discourse-ideological practices are being employed (sub)consciously to legitimize a monolithic rape-discourse ideology in commercial cinema. Cinematic rape has not been studied from a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective in Bangladeshi. The aim of this research is not to focus particularly on hardcore pornographic vulgarity or physical violence during the act of rape; rather to explore how rape-discourse is legitimized in mainstream Bangladeshi cinema.

II. CINEMATIC RAPE

Rape, whether as main theme or sub-theme, generally tends to be employed in popular films of the Indian sub-continent for revenge-motive, where characters other than the victims take revenge, with the exception of a few. The rape victims in Hollywood movies tend to have a strong frame of mind, where the victims themselves take revenge by killing the rapists (I Spit on Your Grave, 1978, 2010, 2013; The Last House on the Left, 1972, 2009), tackling them (i.e. rapists) in the courtroom (The Accused, 1988), taking psychological rape-revenge (Descent, 2007). Furthermore, Hollywood does not tend to shy away from cinematic portrayal of male-rape (Deliverance, 1972; Sleepers, 1996; I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead, 2004), as well as incest-rape (Chinatown, 1974). Not a single Bangladeshi commercial film has dealt with such rape themes in its entire history. In Bangladeshi Bangla films, due to social stigma, people do not usually tend to go to court to prove their case(s); in the alternative film Priyotomeshu (2009) by Morshedul Islam, the rape victim goes to court and tries to prove the rapist guilty with the help of her neighbour. In other words, Hollywood movies tend to explore multi-dimensional themes of rape psychology, where the victims somewhat come to terms with the physical and psychological trauma of rape, whereas in Bollywood and Dhallywood movies usually rape is used as a motif for revenge (mono-dimensional theme of rape), taken by the protagonist and not the victim herself. Though Asian cinema does not usually try to explore different facets of cinematic rape, there are a few exceptions. The critically acclaimed Japanese film Rashomon (1950), even though produced almost 65 years ago, looks at the tabooed issue of rape from different perspectives and vantage points in trying to explore the various dimensions of ‘so-called truth’. The Bandit Queen (1994) cinematically depict strong portrayals of the rape-victims. One may argue that The Bandit Queen is based on real events and therefore could not deviate from the truth. However, Rashomon, a fictional story, despite the fact that its protagonist was raped, was enthusiastically accepted by American critics and audiences but not so much by the Japanese audiences in the 1950s. In Guerrilla (2011), when the
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III. BANGLADESHI POPULAR CINEMA

Films produced by mainstream film industry of Bangladesh, that is, Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (BFDC) are popular, commercial or mainstream cinema of Bangladesh. Generally these films tend to be commercial in nature, and are made in accordance to the rules and regulations of BFDC. Film Development Cooperation (FDC) studio started its journey in 1957 through the enactment of a law by the East Pakistan Assembly, under the Ministry of Information, which was run by an eight-member board from various government and non-government organizations [see 10, 11]. Though Hiratal Sen started filming actuality footage during 1898-1901 in Calcutta and Dhaka, the first Bangla film was called Mukh O Mukhosh (The Face and the Mask), which was directed, produced, written and acted by Abdul Jabbar Khan [see 12, 13, 14]. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, when this nation started reconstructing its infrastructure, the films that were produced predominantly had Muktiyuddho (Liberation War) related themes [see 13, 15, 16, 17, 18]. However, as the country progressed, FDC produced films that explored other themes based on literature, fairy tale, social issues, folk, action, supernatural, children, history, comedy, adventure, fantasy, national awakening, biography, and so on [see 13, 15, 16, 17, 18]. Though rape was never employed as the main theme of commercial movies, it was employed in a number of Muktiyuddho based films, as well as action and some history based films. Since FDC provides producers with logistic and financial assistance, the state “automatically partners the financing and production of almost all popular films and is also the main financier for FDC” [19].

IV. CINEMATIC RAPE IN DHALLYWOOD FILMS

There is no empirical study in Bangladesh that specifically looks at the discourse of rape in Bangladeshi commercial cinema from a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective. However there are a few studies that look at the construction of women and/or their identity in war films [see 20, 21, 22, 23], where rape is usually discussed as one of the sub-themes of the studies. Hoek [24] looks at the pornographic aspects of Bangladeshi action film in her analysis of cut-pieces. If the rape scenes are sexualized and explicit, they are cut from films and become part of cut-piece collection. Cut-pieces are censored portions of films that are not considered suitable for viewing by the Bangladeshi audience. Bangladesh Film Censor Board (BFCB) makes the decisions as to what is or is not suitable for viewing. BFCB makes its decisions based on four sets of rules: The Cinematograph Act, 1918; The Censorship of Films Act, 1963; The Bangladesh Censorship of Films Rules 1977; The Code for Censorship of Films in Bangladesh, 1985. Mohiuddin [25] looks at rules and regulations of censorship implemented by BFCB, where it states films that depict “actual act of sex, rape or passionate love scenes of immoral nature” will be considered as immoral and obscene. According to The Code for Censorship of Films in Bangladesh, 1985 (No. S.R.O.478-L/ 85), Section 4 has specific regulations regarding 'Immorality and Obscene' which strictly controls rape scenes.

V. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The discursive study of a piece of text, whether spoken, written, symbolic, visual, audio-visual, in order to unveil opaque issue(s) that may be oppressive and/or exclusionary in nature, which are embedded in the social structure of a society is called critical discourse analysis or CDA for short [see 26, 27, 28]. The primary objective of CDA is to expose such non-apparent issues to uninformed people of a society and make them informed of what they did not know or were ignorant about in order to make informed decisions so that they cannot be taken advantage of or beguiled [see 26, 27, 28].

VI. SOCIAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS RAPE VICTIMS

Conservative attitude, collectivist mentality, strong patriarchal presence, and religious misinterpretations tend to inhibit the commercial film industry from exploring the different facets of rape in the Indian sub-continent, because rape related theme or sub-theme of a film may not be socially acceptable; particularly when the protagonist herself is the victim. Hence, whether the rape victims can live with the abuse and/or be accepted by the family members as well as the society is also significant and needs to be explored in the cinematic portrayal of this hideous crime.

Society seems to have a polarized attitude towards the act of rape, the victim and the rapist. Even though feminists feel that they have the right to wear whatever they choose, sleep with whoever they desire, and be with as many partners as they want [see 3], there is abundance of opinions from men, women and even the legal profession/professionals to suggest otherwise [see 9]. The western society tends to pride itself in being a very modern society in terms of exploring sexual and/or promiscuous relationships between unmarried people, gays and lesbians, and has no problem with premarital sex and multiple sexual partners before marriage. Despite their openness towards sexual orientation, they had and to a certain
extent still have a collective consciousness towards rape, virtue, celibacy and abstinence. The attitude of societies towards rape is a complex phenomenon and cannot and/or should not be merely reduced to ‘men vs. women’, ‘patriarchy vs. matriarchy’, ‘feminism vs. patriarchy’ terms and phrases. The sentiment that death is better than rape or the stigma of rape runs deep and has an explicit and/or implicit connection to virtue, celibacy and abstinence in various societies. The story of Maria Goretti [see 9] in the early 20th century has had tremendous influence in how society—men, women and lawmakers—perceive rape and virtue. In 1902, Alessandro Serenelli, an Italian farmhand, tried to rape his neighbor Maria Goretti. She refused his attempts and he responded by stabbing her fourteen times with a knife. On her way to the hospital, before she died, Goretti forgave her attacker. Because she died rather than allow her chastity to be violated by a rapist and she forgave her assailant, the Roman Catholic Church canonized St. Maria Goretti...

Dissection

VII. RAPE IN BANGLADESH

Rape is quite prevalent in Bangladesh, whether it is rape by an individual or by a gang. One has to merely open the newspaper to find one or more rape reports almost every day. Delhi may unofficially be considered as the rape city/capital of the world, but they also protest such a heinous crime as a community and as a nation. Unlike India, Bangladeshis as a nation do not seem to be so vigilant and do not protest against the social system that disrespects and sexually abuses not only women and teenagers, but also children as young as five-year old. For instance, after the gang rape of the Garo girl in May 2015, only the Garo community, a minority group, came out to protest [see 34, 35]. Where was the rest of Bangladesh? Certain groups in Bangladesh protested against the Delhi bus gang-rape that occurred in 2012, but showed no reaction to the rape of a girl from a minority community. Rape is occurring so rampant in this country that it has become an everyday occurrence—hardly anyone seems to pay attention regarding how this heinous crime may be curbed. The reflection of rampant occurrences of rape in society seems to be a common phenomenon in Bangladeshi commercial cinema.

VIII. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a qualitative research approach and method [see 28, 36, 37] to study cinematic discourse of rape from critical dimensions. Data was gathered from 14 Bangladeshi commercial films—Ora 11 Jon, Roktakto Bangla, Arunodoyer Agni Shakhi, Sangram, Alor Michhil, Megher Anek Rong, Kalimilata, Megher Pore Megh, Bastir Rani Suriya, Ammajan, Ms. Diana, Police Officer, Meyrao Mastan, and Guerilla. These Bangladeshi popular films range from 1971-2014. To be considered eligible for analysis, a film had to have a rape scene and/or have rape as main or sub-theme. Alternative/art films, short-films and telefilms were not considered in this study. Purposive sampling was employed to gather the data from Bangladeshi Bangla films because it enabled the researcher to not only choose particular films with rape, but also analyze rape scenes in order to gather specific information from those films.

Haque’s [27] Three-dimensional Discursive Model (TDM) and Hall’s [38, 39] cultural representation were considered as the theoretical framework for looking at the discourse of rape and how it is legitimized in Bangladeshi popular cinema. TDM has three analytical phases:

- Stage 1: Discourse Analysis—Dissection and Correlation
- Stage 2: Ideological analysis—apparent and aberrant ideologies
- Stage 3: Societal analysis—discourse-ideological and consumer-oriented practices

2 https://www.nive.com/video/bangladesh-gang-rape

During the Societal Analysis Phase (i.e. Stage 3), Hall’s [38, 39] cultural representation is incorporated to explain how the discursive representation of rape is a construct of the consumer-culture practice.

IX. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the third stage of Haque’s [27] TDM framework, Hall’s [38, 39] cultural representation framework is incorporated. Hall says that language is “one of the ‘media’ through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture” [38].

In this respect, we can comprehend that even though physical violence of rape is oppressive, what is more damaging is the language associated with the aftermath of the gruesome act as is quite apparent from many of the Bangla films. For instance, the following words and expressions are all related to rape and stigma associated with rape: opobitro (impure, unholy, unchaste), olokki (bad omen, sinister), noshto (ruined, rotten, spoiled, unchaste, fallen, degraded), nichu (low, inferior), jokhonno (disgusting, abominable), jaroj shontan (illegitimate child, bastard), upojukto noy (unworthy, inappropriate, undeserving), choritro hina (characterless, unchaste, licentious, immoral), baishya britti (prostitution), baishya (prostitute), kulute mey (loose woman, loose character), kolongko (stigma, disgrace, scandal, shame, infamy), lanchhito [abused, (s)exploit], opoya (bad omen, ill-omened, unlucky), kolongkini bou (stained bride/wife, unchaste bride/wife).

Such language is quite prevalent and more apparent in following films than others: Ora 11 Jon (1972), Roktakto Bangla (1972), Arunodoyer Agni Shakkhi (1972), Megher Anek Rong (1976), Kalmilata (1981), Megher Pore Megh (2004), Bastir Rani Suriya (2004), Ammajan (1999), and Ms. Diana (2003). And the uncanny thing is that such language is a cultural representation of rape where the victims are physically abused first by the rapists (villains, Pakistani soldiers, rajakars in the 14 films), and then victimized again and again by society, culture, misinterpretation of religion and themselves. Such victimization never lets them forget what has happened, and the synonymous words, when included in everyday discourse, reinforce the stigma that was forced upon them by the rapists.

Hall says that representation is a process that involves “the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things” [39]. Rape in Bangladeshi popular cinema is in fact not depicted explicitly. In a simplistic way, rape in Bangladeshi commercial films is made apparent in line with Hall’s definition of representation, that is, initially through signs and images, as discussed earlier (e.g. Figures 1-3), and then through language (e.g. see rape-expressions).

From a more complex perspective, rape can be perceived in terms of what Hall [39] categorizes as the two processes or systems of representation—concepts or mental representations and language. They help to facilitate the construction of meaning via signs, through which meanings of spoken and written words, sounds and/or images are comprehended [39]. Among the sounds of rape, following are quite prevalent in Bangladeshi popular cinema: loud heinous laughter (of Pakistani soldier or villain), “no, no, noooooooooo,” “save me, save me,” “don’t ruin me,” intense music, pathetic music, sombre/grave music, shrill heart wrenching music, crying, weeping, sobbing, screaming or screams, grunts of struggle, grunts of protest. When the two systems of representation correspond with each other to form a connection between ‘things’, ‘concepts’ and ‘signs’ to produce meaning in language, this is what Hall calls ‘representation’ in terms of culture, which is a very complex phenomenon [39].

It is the cultural representation in films and in society that are operationalized through the discourse-ideological and consumer-oriented practices. Consequently, rape is projected from a very myopic lens. A consumer-oriented society thinks, functions, and operates from a purely capitalist perspective.
Capitalism exploits apparent and aberrant ideologies in order to make profit at the end of the day. Bangladeshi commercial films tend to serve the interest of the majority of people in order to be accepted. If the majority wants to see a certain perception of rape victim in films, they are not disappointed, as filmmakers of a consumerist society will endeavour to fulfill those desires. These are done through the cultural representations in commercial Bangla films by discursively recreating rape on the silver screen in accordance to Hall’s [38, 39] definition, that is, language (written and spoken), sounds and images, which produce meaning by connecting ‘things’, ‘concepts’ and ‘signs’.

X. LEGITIMIZATION OF RAPE-DISCUSS

The legitimization of cinematic rape-discourse in Bangladeshi popular cinema occurs through the realization of discursive formation of rape (see Figure 4) in Bangladeshi popular cinema.

The discursive formation can be realized in different combinations. Sometimes, only an ‘image’ can be shown as in one of the opening scenes of Alor Michhil (1974) where a woman is shown clutching her thick long hair with both hands (see Figure 1) to represent rape of individuals as well as a nation; sometimes, it could be only sounds, as in one of the rape scenes in Guerrilla (2011) where we hear sounds of a major enjoying himself and a girl crying, coming from inside of a room. Sometimes you get all the signs of rape, that is, ‘images’, ‘sounds’ and ‘language’ which illustrates the discursive formation of rape in its entirety in Bangladeshi popular cinema, as in Ms. Diana (2003). The discursive formation (of rape) through the various signs (of rape)—image, sound, language—contributes to the explicit or implicit (re)construction of rape. It is through this mechanism that rape is acclimatized and legitimized in Bangladeshi popular cinema. In the (re)construction of rape, partial or full-frontal nudity is prohibited by culture and Bangladesh Film Censor Board (BFCB). However, partial nudity is legitimized through artistic (re)construction as in Kalmilata (1981) (Figure 5).

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to find physically vulgar seductive scenes during rape in Bangladeshi popular cinema because such scenes would be censored by Bangladesh Film Censor Board (BFCB). As already mentioned above, the Code for Censorship of Films in Bangladesh, 1985, under the ‘Immorality and Obscenity’ clause clearly prohibits explicit sexual scenes. The hardcore rape scenes can be found in the cut pieces [see 24]. Even though rape-commerce seems to be prevalent in western films, particularly in Hollywood movies where heterosexual/homosexual rape, and incest are exploited on the silver screen, due to strict rules and regulations of BFCB as well as social and religious reservations rape cannot be explicitly exploited and/or portrayed in Bangladeshi mainstream cinema. Hence, a cinematic discourse of rape operates in Bangladeshi popular cinema within the cultural and censor-regulatory norms of our society, which has a deeper connotative representation. It is the discursive formation, which operates through the signs of rape in the forms of image, sound and language that legitimizes this heinous and tabooed act on the silver screen in Bangladesh.

[NOTE: This paper is part of my thesis which was submitted to Independent University Bangladesh in November 2015, as a requirement for the MSS in Media and Communication degree]

REFERENCES


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