

(Mis)Representations of Liberation War of Bangladesh in Bollywood Films

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Abstract

This paper examines how Bollywood films represent the Liberation War of Bangladesh. It also attempts to understand how the dynamics of the war has been reflected in the Bollywood films to convey the messages to its audiences. The film is one of the powerful media of modern epoch for the development of a particular nation's identity, culture, and politics. Considering the large audiences and influences of Bollywood across the world, it is important to know how its movies represent the history of Bangladesh. Through the lens of representation theory, this study attempts to conduct a content analysis on eight Bollywood films made with a backdrop of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. It is found that all of the Bollywood films except one fail to represent the truth in order to convey the real history. Although a film represents the bona fide history of the war, it mainly focuses on the humiliation of the women in the war.

Keywords: Bollywood, Liberation War, Bangladesh, Representation, Movies.

Introduction

The film is considered one of the powerful media in the modern era for the development of a particular nation's identity, culture, and politics (Brownell & Raymond, 2020). Studies also suggest the film is often used as a tool of soft power in the foreign policy of the superpowers of the world (Aydemir, 2017). This is not only true for Hollywood but also for other film industries including Bollywood, one of the largest film industries in the world. It is said the Bollywood is increasingly becoming a tool of the soft power of India, a potential superpower (Bashar, 2009). Although the Indian film industry is separated into many regional areas, nevertheless the term 'Bollywood' is often used to describe the whole film industry in India. According to a report, around 1,500 to 2,000 films are produced in the

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country every year in over 20 languages while around 700 films are made in the USA and Canada annually (Thomas, 2016). In 2017, a total of 1,986 feature films were produced in India, with Bollywood as its largest filmmaker, producing 364 Hindi films the same year (Film Federation of India, 2017). Films made in Bollywood are often categorized under a useful and legitimate genre grouping like romance, social, family drama, offbeat, good music, and tragic love story. Another dominant form that is still undefined as a genre grouping is- the historical film with a number of subjects: pre-Islamic India, Mughal kinship, Indian resistance to colonial rule, riots during the partition year, Indo-Pak hostility, Kashmir conflict, Liberation War of Bangladesh, and Afghan war (Mitra, 2008). After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, very few Bollywood films have been produced based on the Liberation War of Bangladesh. In India, the war is often remembered as the third Indo-Pakistan war (Zakaria, 2019). Studies find a lot of people can and do believe some of the things they see in the movies (Tunzelmann, 2017). It is also found Bollywood films can make its audiences confused for historical facts (BBC, 2016). So, considering the influence of Bollywood across the world, it is important to know how the Bollywood films represent the Liberation War of Bangladesh. This paper aims to do so. Specifically, it aims to understand how the dynamics of the war has been reflected in the Bollywood films to convey the messages to its audiences. To do so this study focuses on commercial films made in Bollywood in which the Liberation War of Bangladesh has been represented directly or indirectly. Through the lens of representation theory, this study attempts to analyze the content of eight films selected using the purposive sampling method. The films are *Jai Bangladesh*, *Mera Desh Mera Dharam*, *1971*, *Gunday*, *Children of War*, *The Ghazi Attack*, *Raazi*, and *Romeo Akbar Walter*. According to Stuart Hall's representation theory, there are lots of ways an event could be represented in a text and the producer try to 'fix' a meaning (or way of understanding) of the event in their texts (Hall, 1997). So, this study could be helpful to understand the intention of Bollywood producers in representing the Liberation War. This study would also assist to know how Bengali nationalist identity is developing throughout the world and what should be done to showcase the glorious history of the nation.

The Liberation War of Bangladesh and India's Role

The Liberation War of Bangladesh is the core identity and the pride of the Bengali nation. Shortly after the birth of Pakistan as a country with two noncontiguous territories known as West Pakistan (today's Pakistan) and

East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) in 1947, the struggle for Bengali rights started. Began with the refusal to accept Bengali as a state language of Pakistan in the early years after the Partition the relations between the two parts got sour day by day. Besides the economic disparity between the two parts, the hegemony of the West Pakistani ruling elite over Pakistan, martial laws, and a demeaning attitude towards Bengali culture and the Bengali population made Bengali people agitated that led to a nationalist movement. The movement got the highest momentum in December 1970 when the Awami League (AL) won the national elections with an absolute majority but West Pakistan parties, namely the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), backed by the army, refused to hand over the power. Without accommodating the majority party, the military rulers chose to launch a genocide to suppress the struggle of the Bengalis. On 25 March 1971, when the genocide was initiated through 'Operation Searchlight' by the army, the Liberation War of Bangladesh started immediately under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, president of AL. All Bengali patriotic people participated in the war from their respective positions and Bangladesh achieved its independence through a nine-month-long bloody war. It is estimated that around 3 million people lost their lives and around four lacs women were raped by Pakistani soldiers and their local collaborators during the war.

India supported the Bengali resistance from the beginning and gave shelter to around ten million refugees. They also launched Operation Jackpot, a full-fledged operation to recruit, train, arm, equip, supply, and advise Mukti Bahini³ fighters engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Pakistan military. India also launched a global diplomatic offensive to help create Bangladesh. When the Pakistan Air Force launched pre-emptive strikes on airfields in Western India on December 3, 1971, India responded by formally declaring war in the wee hours of December 4. So, India got involved directly in the war for the last 13 days from 3 December to 16 December 1971 till Pakistani troops surrendered to the joint forces of India and Bangladesh in Dhaka. Nearly 3,900 Indian soldiers were killed and nearly 10,000 others injured in the war (Philip, 2019). However, Indians tend to remember the war as the third Indo-Pak war and Bangladesh was created as a byproduct of the war (Zakaria, 2019).

³ The Mukti Bahini, also known as the Bangladesh Forces, was the guerrilla resistance movement consisting of the Bangladeshi military, paramilitary and civilians during the War of Liberation.

The Liberation War of Bangladesh in Bollywood films

This study analyzes eight movies to explore how Bollywood represents the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

Jai Bangladesh

The war drama film *Jai Bangladesh*, directed by I.S. Johar, was released in 1971. The 120 minutes movie is a story of a family; how the members of the family were involved in the Liberation War. The sheik of the family was an army officer who fought on behalf of the British. When West Pakistanis attacked their country, the whole family participated in the Liberation War in 1971 (Johar, 1971).

In the first scene of the movie, two children sing a song which talks about the persecution of Pakistani rulers. At the time of 7 minutes and 49 seconds of the film, the visual story narrates the discussion of the family members about how they will contribute to the independence of the country. In this scene, there were three photographs, portraits of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and Rabindranath Tagore, hanging on the wall. It creates an obscurity about the family and what kind of ideological belief they possess. Moreover, there is no evidentiary scene, dialogue, or narrative⁴ in the film that describes what was the context of the war, why the war was begun. However, at the point of 10 minutes and 10 seconds of the film, the genocide by Pakistani army is showed in visually but there is no evidential dialogue, scene, or narration to establish the history whether it was 25 march of 1971 or not. At the point of 27 minutes of the film, there is a visual of an inhuman torture over general people. At the point of 56 minutes and 30 seconds of the film, another song is played. The visuals of the song are very insignificant in terms of Bangladeshi culture. At the time of 1 hour and 22 minutes of the film, a dance has been performed by which the filmmaker tries to portray the entertainment of Pakistani army which is also insignificant with the history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. At the point of 1 hour and 34 minutes, the main protagonist of the film who is a freedom fighter becomes blind. He gets his sight back by a saint's prayer. The prayer is also expressed in a song where Kaaba, Church, Temple, Quran, Gita, and Bible are shown visually. These are illogical and digressive with the history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. At the time of 1 hour and 57 minutes of the film, Pakistani army washed away by a bore, which is not relevant to the history.

⁴ A narrative is essentially a story that links elements and sequences together to convey specific meanings for interpreting the world (Patterson & Monroe, 1998).

In this movie, Bollywood has manipulated the glorious history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 in many ways. The director describes a story, which is fictitious in every definition and he failed to represent the dynamics of the Liberation War. Besides many irrelevant scenes are shown, the contribution of India in the Liberation War of Bangladesh is also absent in this film.

Mera Desh Mera Dharam

The war drama film *Mera Desh Mera Dharam* was released in 1973, directed by Dara Singh. The film is 130 minutes in length. The main theme of this movie is based on the battle of freedom fighters and their sacrifice for the country during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. The narrative of the movie describes how the freedom fighters defeated the Pakistani army in the war of 1971 (Singh, 1973).

The movie starts with a voice narration describing the history. At the point of 5 minutes of the film, an announcement of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was narrated by an audio-graphical narration and the war started. Then some freedom fighters on horseback entered a village and observed a brutal massacre of the Pakistani Army over the villagers. There is no precedent whether the freedom fighters on horseback fought in the war of 1971. Rather it is a fictitious depiction about freedom fighters. After that, the movie visualized a persecution scene over general people where the dying people uttered 'Jai Bangla'. At the point of 13 minutes of the film, the film screens that the freedom fighters freed the village from Pak army and then a war song was played in the movie. At the time of 29 minutes of the film, a West Pakistan supporter Bengali police officer's wife whose son was a freedom fighter opposed the crimes of Pakistani army by the sake of Islam. A lustful dance was performed in the film at the time of 48 minutes, which is digressive with the film narrative. At the time of 1 hour and 4 minutes of the film, it narrates a chase scene where the Bengali police officer with the force was trying to arrest his son and other freedom fighters, but the police failed to catch them and his son escaped. After that, a group of women is watched in the film singing a song on the street to collect fund for the war. However, this song creates an obscurity about the location, whether it was the free areas of Bangladesh or whether it was in India. At the point of 1 hour and 20 minutes of the film, another lustful dance was performed to portray the enjoyment of Pakistani army and Razakars, which seems to be intentionally used for commercial purpose. At the time of 1 hour and 38 minutes of the film, the freedom fighters rescued

some women from a concentration camp of Pak army. Then the final war began. The freedom fighters achieved their victory against the Pakistani army at the time of 2 hours and 7 minutes of the film. They hoisted the flag of Bangladesh after bending down the Pakistani flag. The depiction of the hoisting of the Bangladeshi flag was a real scene of the war. The movie ends with the surrender of the Pakistani army and with the homecoming archive footage of Bangabandhu.

Although this film portrays the real history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh, it focuses mainly on the dramatic story of the film. The film failed to reveal the inquietude and obsessed situation of the war. It failed to portray Bengali culture and their norms. Freedom fighters on horseback, theatrical dialogues, digressive songs, and dances faded the war situation of 1971.

1971

The film *1971* was released in 2007 directed by Amrit Sagar. The story starts from 1977 at a Pakistani army camp in Pakistan, six years after the end of the war of 1971. A group of Indian soldiers was imprisoned by the Pakistani army. The 138 minutes film portrays the tale of an escape of six soldiers who were imprisoned along with other members of that group and Major Suraj Singh was the team leader of the escaped group (Sagar, 2007).

The director linked the present situation of the movie with the Liberation War of Bangladesh by a voice narration. According to the voice narration, "...1971, a war which took place between Hindustan and Pakistan in 1971, has been given the name as Bangladesh war. Pakistan will never forget the defeat and we will never forget the battle. Because we fought that battle shoulder to shoulder for our adoring Hindustan" (Sagar, 2007). The voice narration has been continued for three minutes from the opening of the movie and states that the war was the Indo-Pak war of 1971. This movie narrates the struggle and the sufferings of Major Suraj Singh's group. There is nothing else in the whole movie about the Liberation War of Bangladesh except the opening narration.

The visual storytelling of this movie is the ultimate bravery of an Indian army officer Major Suraj Singh and his fellows. However, the most conflicting part of this movie is the opening narration where it states that the Indo-Pak war of 1971 has been given a name as Bangladesh war. The narration challenges the real history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

Gunday

The film *Gunday* was released in 2014, written and directed by Ali Abbas Zafar. The 152 minutes film portrays a life journey of two orphan boys named Bikram and Bala. The journey starts on 16 December 1971 from the day when a new country named Bangladesh was born. When the two boys got shelter in the Geneva refugee camp in Dhaka, they involved in different crimes including murder. Later, the boys escaped from the camp to Kolkata. In the new city, they again engaged in different crimes for their survival. At one point, both of them fell in love with a bar dancer, who is a police officer appointed to arrest them. Centering the love, they become hostile to each other and finally both Bikram and Bala are killed by police (Zafar, 2014).

The movie starts with the following voice narration (Zafar, 2014):

16th December 1971. The third war between India and Pakistan has just ended. Ninety thousand Pakistani soldiers have just surrendered to the Indian Army. This is the largest surrender by a country since the Second World War. A new country is born – Bangladesh.

There is nothing else in this movie about the Liberation War of Bangladesh except the voice narration. The director seems to portray that it was just an Indo-Pak war and Bangladesh was born by chance. In this movie, there is no reflection of the genocide and the inhuman tortures over the general people of Bangladesh by the Pakistan Army. The film also apparently indicates that Bangladeshis were involved in various crimes like arms smuggling (Ferdous, 2014).

Children of War

The movie *Children of War*, directed by Mrityunjay Devvrat, released on May 16, 2014, and the duration of the movie is 160 minutes, based on the Liberation War of Bangladesh. In the film, there are three parallel stories are narrated but the focus of the story was the brutal rape and torture of Bangladeshi women by the Pakistan Army and their local collaborators-Razakars, Al-Badr, and Al-shams. The director visually narrated how a nation was born by the sacrifice of 3 million martyrs and almost four lacs of Bangladeshi humiliated women (Devvrat, 2014).

The movie starts with an interview of Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India in 1971, where she raised her voice against the genocide of Pak Army. At the point of 7 minutes and 50 seconds of the film, the visual

narration was the announcement of the independence of Bangladesh by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The next was a rape scene of a woman in front of her husband then she was sent to a concentration camp of the Pakistani Army. How women helped Mukti Bahini, how they were raped and tortured by the Pakistani Army in the concentration camp is visually narrated in the film. At the point of 1 hour and 51 minutes of the film, a scene portrays an inhuman torture of Pakistani army on a freedom fighter. The film ends with portraying *Shahbag Movement*⁵ where protesters demand the capital punishment of the war criminals.

In this film, the director visually narrates the sacrifices of Bengalis in the Liberation War of Bangladesh. How inhumanly the Pakistani Army tortured the general people and especially how they humiliated Bengali women are portrayed. There is also a socio-political representation of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in the film's visual storytelling. However, the rape scene is like a commercial scene of mainstream Bollywood.

The Ghazi Attack

The Ghazi Attack is a 2017 war film written and directed by Sankalp Reddy. The 120 minutes film's plot is based on the Indo-Pak naval war of 1971. It portrays the events relating to the Pakistan naval submarine PNS Ghazi being sunk by the Indian Navy when it ventured into Indian waters to destroy INS Vikrant on the shores of Visakhapatnam (Reddy, 2017).

The film starts with a voice over which says the war of 1971 was a battle between India and Pakistan. However, the voice over narrates the history of the war in the following way (Reddy, 2017):

In 1971, when Bangladesh was known as East Pakistan. For the first time, the roots of tyrant West Pakistan seemed to be losing their roots in the East. The rebellion by the Bengali nationalist revolutionaries was at an all time high. Agitated by their guerilla army "Mukti Bahini" the Pakistani government launched 'Operation Searchlight'. Soon the roads of Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet, Khulna, and Jessore were soaked in blood. Millions of East Pakistani refugees entered the borders of India expecting help. Now India and Pakistan's attitude towards each other started getting

⁵ Shahbag Movement is the largest movement in the recent history of Bangladesh initiated by some young blogger and online activists at Shahbag, Dhaka on February 5, 2013 demanding capital punishment of war criminals.

stronger. But Pakistan's approach was clear. Any Bengali who was suspected of being nationalists or their supporters, the Pakistani army would drag them out of their homes and kill them.

Although, in the disclaimer, it is said that the film is a fiction, by showing newspaper reports, it presents the story as a true historical event. Despite the opening voice narration, the film says nothing about the struggles and valor of Bangladeshi freedom fighters. The whole film is about the valor of a naval officer of the Indian Navy and his team, who remained underwater for 18 days and sank off the Pakistani submarine. However, at the point of 37 minutes, a female refugee, who was saved by an Indian navy officer, sings the national anthem of Bangladesh. Later, she says that she thought she was caught by Pakistanis. That's why she sang the song as a suicidal attempt since Pakistanis shoot immediately if anybody sings it. She also said she wanted to save her honor in this way. This scene portrays the Pakistani Army humiliating women during the war while Indians saved them.

Although this film does not manipulate the history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh, it portrays those parts of the war which are compatible with popular Indian narratives. Specifically, since this film mainly focuses on naval war portraying Pakistanis as antagonists while Indian as protagonists, it portrays those events which are required to establish it. So, the contribution and sacrifices of Bengali freedom fighters to the war is ignored in this film.

Raazi

Raazi is a 2018 spy thriller film directed by Meghna Gulzar. The 135 minutes film is an adaptation of Harinder Sikka's 2008 novel *Calling Sehmat*, a true account of an Indian Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) agent who, upon her father's request, is married into a family of military officials in Pakistan to relay information to India in 1971. Based on her information, the Indian Navy sank off Pakistani submarine PNS Ghazi.

The film starts with the following speech of a military official (Gulzar, 2018):

It's been 46 years now since three defense forces of our country came together and won a war against Pakistan in 1971. And severed a part of Pakistan away from it. Those senior officers who have witnessed that war can never forget the sacrifices of that time.

In the end, showing the archive footages of 1971 wars, this film narrates the ending of the war through the following voice over of an electronic news report:

Our Navy and Air Force have extensively damaged the ports of East and West Pakistan. Pakistani forces in East Pakistan have laid down their weapons in surrender to the Indian Army. Last evening Pakistan announced a unilateral ceasefire. India has won the war.

The film clearly says that it was an Indo-Pak war and India created Bangladesh. Moreover, it says Pakistani forces surrendered to the Indian Army which is wrong. They surrendered to the joint forces of Indian and Bangladesh.

However, at the point of 2 minutes and 38 seconds of the film, it tries to portray the struggle of Bengalis for the liberation through a dialogue of a Pakistani Army officer: “The struggle for liberation is gaining momentum in East Pakistan...Mujibur Rahman has managed to gather a group of people who now call themselves the Mukti Fouz”. However, the film shows nothing about the struggles and sacrifices of freedom fighters. Rather, it portrays India helped Bangladeshi freedom fighters from the beginning of the war to divide Pakistan.

Romeo Akbar Walter

This action thriller film, released on 5 April 2019, is written and directed by Robbie Grewal. The story of this 133 minutes film centers around a Muslim banker, son of a soldier who sacrificed his life in Indo-China war. The banker is recruited as a spy of RAW for an undercover operation in Pakistan, where he faces both physical and emotional challenges. This film shows the Pakistani air attack on an Indian air base on December 3, 1971, which helped India to directly engage in the war against Pakistan, was pre-planned by India. The RAW spy implemented the plan and has been working undercover for India.

The film starts with the following voice narration (Grewal, 2019):

1971. This is the story of that time when Pakistan was divided into two parts. West Pakistan and East Pakistan. Nowadays we know East Pakistan as Bangladesh. East Pakistani people were very dissatisfied with the tyranny of the Pakistan government. Everybody was desperately looking for freedom. In this regard, many innocent people

were brutally killed. Thousands of people were trying to flee East Pakistan to escape to India. The Indian government was also supportive of the liberation of East Pakistan. Two neighboring countries were at war with each other.

Showing archive footage of rallies, speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and brutality of Pakistani Army, this film portrays the background of the war briefly. However, this film ends with the following voice narration (Grewal, 2019):

Pakistani Air Force attacked Pathankot Air Base at 5:40 pm on December 3, 1971. And immediately India was attacked by ten other airbases. India was ready for these attacks. And quickly responded to Pakistani attacks. Addressing to the people of India that night, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi said the war between India and Pakistan had started. On December 16, 1971, signing the instrument of surrender, the Pakistani Army accepted the defeat in Dhaka. And a new country was born in the Indian subcontinent, Bangladesh.

The ending message does not say the whole story of the war. It seems that the Indian Army won a short war easily and the Pakistani Army surrendered to them. However, the war, which took thousands of Bangladeshi people's lives, was nine month long and the Pakistani Army surrendered to the joint forces of India and Bangladesh.

Discussions and Conclusions

Every nation tries to highlight its glorious history to strengthen nationalism among its citizens. So, India as a state often focuses on their victory against rival Pakistan in the 1971's war. Ignoring the long struggles and sacrifices of Bangladeshis for independence, they tend to claim that Bangladesh is created by them (Zakaria, 2019). Bollywood also supports this popular narrative to generate revenue that contributes to creating the public perception of the war. Writer Diptakirti Chaudhuri notes "creating fiction in an authentic historical setting is what historical fiction is about, but Bollywood seems to throw the authentic setting to the winds in favor of a better story (BBC, 2016)." This study also supports this statement. Considering the intentional approach of the theories of representation, it is found that Bollywood does not represent the bona fide history of Bangladesh liberation war, rather on several occasions the history is manipulated to establish the popular Indian narratives on the war. Most of the films analyzed in this study tend to portray the 1971 war as one of the

Indo-Pak wars which India won easily and Bangladesh is created as a byproduct of the war. Bollywood films also show the Pakistan Army surrendered to India. However, history says Bangladeshis had been struggling for their rights and independence since 1947 which got the highest momentum in 1971. Although India supported Bangladesh in several ways, they directly engaged in the war for the last 13 days which helped the country to achieve its independence quickly. Moreover, the Pakistan Army surrendered to joint forces of India and Bangladesh. However, it is found that Bollywood tends to highlight the bravery and intelligence of Indians in the war ignoring the contributions and sacrifices of Bangladeshis. In addition, films like *Jai Bangladesh* portrays that the victory of Bengalis against the Pakistani Army is achieved by some divine power, which demeans the struggles and sacrifices of people. The fictitious and dramatic presentation of the war in these films not only fail to depict the horrible situation of the wartime but also portray the Bengali culture and the people incorrectly. This kind of misrepresentation would create a wrong perception among the audiences. Moreover, although they declared that the films are fictions, many audiences could consider it as real history since they show some original footage of the war. Previous studies also support that historical fiction films influence audiences' understanding of history (BBC, 2016). So, although Bollywood is a commercial film industry, its censor board should permit a film ensuring the narratives supported by history. However, this study finds the film *Children of War* portrays the struggles and sacrifices of Bangladeshis in the Liberation War. Nevertheless, there is an exaggeration of a rape scene, which seems like a commercial scene of mainstream Bollywood film as it is portrayed in a way to give the viewers a visual pleasure of voyeurism⁶.

Since the film plays an important role in developing a nation, portraying the glorious history of Bangladesh in films is utmost important for the country. It will not only increase the national integrity but improve the image of the nation in the world. So, besides raising voice against the misrepresentation of the Liberation War in Bollywood films, Bangladeshi film-makers should make more films portraying the bravery of freedom fighters, the sacrifices of martyrs and the humiliation of women. The youths would work more dedicatedly for the betterment of the country, if they know the struggles

⁶ “Voyeurism denotes a demeanor of lasciviousness as they secretly look at the people who are naked while they are in the act of sexual practices. Film viewing is also called as a voyeurism where the spectator takes physical pleasures while watching heated scenes that are demonstrated in the film” (Film Theory, 2015).

and sacrifices that allows them to live in an independent country. The film would be the best medium to make this realization.

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