

BUILDING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL AWARENESS THROUGH CINEMA: THE CASE OF *DAHAN*

Habiba Rahman¹
Saiyeed Shahjada Al Kareem²

Abstract

Feature film holds a significant position in Bangladesh filmscape. However, only a few of these films are aimed at raising social and political consciousness among the audience. One such film is *Dahan* (Affliction), directed by Sheikh Niamat Ali in 1985. Employing the theoretical lens of the Third Cinema, this study investigates how this film contributed in social and political awareness building. Therefore, this article examines the content and stylistic features of the film and concludes with the note that by providing a few alternatives to the traditional cinema techniques, the film successfully delineated the then socio-political reality of Bangladesh characterized by inequality, injustice and intellectual bankruptcy, and sought for social and political emancipation that helps audience enhance their social and political understanding.

Keywords: Political cinema, Third cinema, Historicity, Cultural specificity, Politicization, Critical commitment

Introduction

Bangladeshi fiction films traditionally focus on excessive entertainment rather than making the audience aware of the real world. Like other parts of the world, Bangladeshi escapist films¹ also avoid social and political aspects offering the audience only a partial view of reality. However, *Dahan* (1985) is an exception in this regard. The film picturized various dynamics of the existing system. Although not being stylistically innovative enough, the film marks a difference from the so-called commercial feature films of its time. Being produced during a military

¹ **Habiba Rahman**, Assistant Professor, Department of Television, Film and Photography, University of Dhaka, Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh. Email: habiba.rahman@du.ac.bd

² **Saiyeed Shahjada Al Kareem**, Lecturer, Department of Television, Film and Photography, University of Dhaka, Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh. Email: skareem@du.ac.bd

ruling, it dealt with the prevailing social and political problems which is rare in Bangladesh screen culture. Denying the trends of traditional escapist films, it incorporated a different formal approach. For all these reasons, the film deserves to undergo a thorough analysis in answering the questions like how it explained the socio-political issues and how its content as well as form performed in this regard.

Literature Review

Only a handful of research has examined the representation of socio-political problems in Bangladeshi films. Among these Junaid's (2013) investigation about Bengali filmmakers dealing patterns with social and political issues is significant where he researched *Jibon Theke Neya* (1970) and *Matir Moyna* (2002) employing the Third Cinema theory. The author showed how these films intervened in crisis situations and worked to raise political awareness among the audience. For Junaid (2013), *Jibon Theke Neya* is an allegorical film projecting the Pakistani exploitation on East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) while *Matir Moyna* is a political venture that stands against religious extremism in Bangladesh in the mentioned period. On the other hand, a recent work by Kareem (2021) sketched a brief historiography of the political films where he analysed *Abar Tora Manush Ho* (1973) and *Rupali Shoikotey* (1979) applying the Third Cinema theoretical lens. According to Kareem (2021), these two films critically portrayed social and political problems of the 1970s through offering strong political content and transforming traditional film language and thus, raised voice against injustice. With explicit political content both the film criticized post-independent socio-political crises employing innovative formal techniques. However, there is no such work on the 1980s films.

In the fourth year of its independence from the Pakistani autocratic regime, in 1975, Bangladesh entered into a period when the country was under either direct or indirect authoritarian military rule that continued until 1990. Few studies show how the films made in the late 1970s worked as a language of protest dealing with the existing social and political problems. In the 1980s, the country experienced social and political inequalities under the autocratic regimes of General Zia and then General Ershad. Although a few politically conscious films were produced in that decade, no academic study yet explored the films to understand how these films dealt with the socio-political issues of that time. Kareem (2021) identified *Dahan* (1985) as a politically conscious film which criticized prevailing social injustice in the 1980s and the political despair evident in post-independent Bangladesh, but it was not substantially argued. Therefore, this investigation into *Dahan* will contribute in understanding the movie itself and fill the gap in the little-

researched area of the politically conscious cinema in Bangladesh produced in the 1980s. Again, as no theoretical interpretation of *Dahan* yet exists in the academia, analysing the film through the theoretical lens of Third Cinema will contribute in the theoretical understanding of Bangladeshi politically conscious films made in the decade of 1980s concerning the fact that how the film worked in building social and political awareness among the audience.

Theoretical Framework

The idea of thought-provoking cinema generally reverbs to the notion of political cinema. The idea of political cinema is interchangeably used with alternative cinema, revolutionary cinema, counter cinema, militant cinema and Third Cinema. According to Comolli and Narboni (1971, p. 30), every film is political because behind any film's production always there works an ideology. However, the true nature of political cinema, according to Johnston (1976, p. 55), is to actively reveal the reality. Comolli and Narboni (1971, pp. 29-32) observed that existing system attempts to employ cinema as an ideological instrument, while a filmmaker's job is to expose that so-called depiction with the aim of burning the bridge between cinema and its establishment-friendly ideology. Thus, films should deal with explicit political issues and engage in atypical depictions of reality with the aim of subverting the dominant ideology. This position of political cinema is understandable in Third Cinema idea. For Solanas and Getino (1970, pp. 4-6), Third Cinema is the perfect alternative to the First Cinema that satisfies only bourgeois ideology, it reveals the truth beneath the veils of imperialism and capitalism. Vaguely in a similar style, Wayne (2001, p. 1) defines Third Cinema as "the most advanced and sophisticated body of political films" that seeks cultural and social emancipation. Offering the example of *The Battle of Algiers*, in his seminal work *Political film: The dialectics of Third Cinema*, Wayne (2001, p. 14) shows how Third Cinema theory can contribute in understanding political films. He suggests four key aspects of Third Cinema: historicity, politicization, critical commitment, and cultural specificity. He argued that Third Cinema employs history as a means of emancipation, fosters political consciousness, sympathizes with the oppressed, and investigates how cultural production serves as an instrument for political struggle (Wayne, 2001, pp. 14-24). Similarly, referring to the films like *Colombia 70* (1970), *The Blood of the Condor* (1969), *Venceremos* (1970), *The Other Francisco* (1975), *Mandabi* (1968), *The Promised Land* (1973), *The Last Supper* (1976), *Double Day* (1976), *One Way or Another* (1977), and *Playa Giron* (1972), Gabriel (1982, pp. 15-20) identified five features of Third Cinema that includes issues of class, religion, culture, armed struggle and sexism.

Employing a variety of creative approaches Third Cinema aims to improve audience awareness through addressing political and ideological concerns. Referring to *La Hora de Los Hornos*, Gabriel (1982, pp. 24-33) outlined different techniques of Third Cinema that includes using written statements, quotations and slogans highlighting significant moments, applying natural sound rather than pre-recorded one, employing handheld camera and experiments in camera movement as well as lighting, emphasizing on collective characters instead of a central one, and similar. Although the Third Cinema theorists prefer unique formal styles, they do not suggest any specific aesthetic style for achieving revolutionary consciousness (Willemen, 1991, pp. 6-7). Espinosa (1997, p. 82) argued that Third Cinema stands for a language alternative to the traditional film language. In relation to this Wayne's (2001, p. 10) observation is although Third Cinema is ideologically opposite to the dominant cinema and Second Cinema, instead of rejecting their style it focuses on transforming their cinematic language. On the other hand, Solanas and Getino (1970, p. 21) emphasized on the filmmaker's own language arguing that a film cannot be decolonized without decolonizing its language.

Taking into account four critical considerations of the Third Cinema as proposed by Wayne (2001): historicity, politicization, critical commitment, and cultural specificity, this study investigates the film *Dahan* to understand how it projected Bangladesh's society and politics, and what was its position concerning the then socio-political system. In his PhD thesis *Bengali Political Cinema: Protest and Social Transformation*, Junaid (2013) elaborately discussed about the characteristics of traditional Bengali films. He identified linear narrative style, melodrama, romantic plot, popular actors and actresses, theatrical appearances including exaggerated performance, comic entertainment, songs, and always a happy ending are the common strategies used in Bengali commercial films (pp. 180, 204), which is certainly true for traditional Bangladeshi films too. Taking these into account, the study also aims to understand if the film language of *Dahan* poses any difference from traditional Bangladeshi films.

Methodology

The film was collected from YouTube due to its unavailability in theatre halls in recent years and the absence of CD or Video Cassette copies in the market. Employing a qualitative approach, the study conducted a textual analysis detailing the film's form and content. Textual analysis is a technique that describes and interprets characteristics of visual or recorded texts with optimum focus on the structure, content and function of the message (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999, p.

225). Brennen (2017) defines texts as things that are used to make meaning (p. 204). He maintains that texts are believed to leave behind traces of a socially constructed reality that can be comprehended by examining the words, concepts, ideas, themes and issues found therein when they are seen within a certain cultural context. Therefore, considering a film itself as a text, textual analysis of a film chiefly focuses on the content and the form of the given film where the narrative, visuals, sounds, dialogues, music, setting, camera angles, editing methods, and similar aspects receive maximum attention to understand which social realities were created through the film text. In textual analysis, according to Brennen (2017), theoretical perspective is vital in the sense that the process of interpretation, for many qualitative researchers, relies heavily on theory (p. 208). Concerning *Dahan*, this study examines the content of the film in the light of Bangladesh's political context during the 1980s with an aim to explore how the film performed as a means of protest against the existing system. On the other hand, in relation to the stylistic features, this article attempts to explore how the film language was employed to convey political messages. In so doing this study applies the key concepts of the Third Cinema theory, including historical authenticity, politicization, critical commitment and cultural specificity, to interpret the film text. Also, the research examines the formal techniques of the film based on the ideas proposed by Third Cinema theorists.

Storyline of *Dahan*

The story of the film is built upon the day-to-day experience of Munir, an unemployed young man struggling to live in Dhaka city with his family members—his mother, younger sister, and a now-deranged maternal uncle with a long background of political activism. In quest of earning a livelihood, after completing graduation, Munir had to experience many social problems which is standard in an unequal social structure. For the meantime, he manages everyday living through private tutoring and writing in newspapers as a freelancer.

Always he walks through different parts of the city and closely observes numerous bizarre around the town. Poverty, hunger, price hike, food adulteration, corruption, patriarchy and crime against women, declining cultural values, invasion of overseas culture, intellectual bankruptcy, growing class difference, shrinking civil rights, political despair, and many other odds upset Munir. His student Ivy wishes to marry him, but he cannot agree considering her well-off status compared to his own lower-class-living.

Munir earnestly tries to fulfil family responsibilities like arranging the marriage of younger sister Lina or the maternal uncle's treatment but fails. Losing hope of securing a job, Munir decides to join in business with his friend Sadek, a travel agent. He borrows a large sum of money from his friend Shumit for business purpose. However, Sadek deceives him.

On the other hand, his maternal uncle—a disheartened former political activist turned psychiatric patient— also leaves the house and gets lost. Plights further continue when Lina's fiancé refuses to marry after a long relationship. Ashamed and upset by social pressure, Lina also leaves the house. Getting no positive vibe from Munir, Ivy decides to marry her family's chosen bridegroom.

Failure in every stage made Munir outrageous for a moment; he speedily walks through the avenues and reaches a no-through zone fenced with barbed wire. Out of agony, he tries to break the barbed fence but only succeeds in bleeding by sharp nails of the barbed wire.

Film Analysis

The following discussion is designed to analyse the film in the light of the Third Cinema, also the theoretical lens of this study, and, therefore, discusses the social as well as the political context of Bangladesh and how it is represented in *Dahan* with what potential impacts.

Historical Authenticity in Dahan

History is an essential aspect of Third Cinema considering it a critical tool for building political awareness and achieving emancipation. According to Wayne (2001, p. 14), Third Cinema aspires to improve audiences' understanding about historical processes including changes, contradictions and conflicts within and outside the events. As history excels at explaining who we are, why we are and where we are, denoting Willemsen (1989), Wayne emphasizes developing cinema as a medium to see into the depth of historical shade.

Taking into account this observation, it can be argued that *Dahan* successfully depicted manifold crises of post-independent Bangladesh characterized by struggling economy, political instability, growing violence, and adverse effect of global politics.

The fact is political front in Bangladesh has been fraught with violence and instability since independence. Just in the fourth year of independence, the country's

founding father was killed that followed by several military coups and junta ruling of General Zia and General Ershad which came to an end through a mass uprising in 1990. Significantly, both the junta rulers stripped off their military identity through forming political parties and transforming themselves into politicians. For example, General Zia founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (Ahmad, 2016, p. 121) while Ershad established Janadal and Jatiya Party in 1986 (Ahmed, 2000, p. 306-310). Moreover, many infamous politicians re-entered in politics by establishing new parties during this period. This kind of political bankruptcy successfully portrayed in *Dahan* through the dialogues of Munir's maternal uncle where the character hints at the public frustration over politics as well as newly formed political platforms, or satire to the political initiatives of Pandab Mia and his political party which provides sufficient historical authenticity to the audience.

Significantly, except few exceptions, the film avoided explicit reference to the prevailing military ruling throughout the story though its theme is entirely based on social and political injustice. The fact is making a film like *Dahan* under military rule was challenging and standing against the ruling regime was further damaging. Yet, the film stuck to its ideological commitment through offering a quick pan shot showing different graffiti on Dhaka University buildings including one seeking *Samorik sashon hothao* [Denounce military rule]. Though it was an intelligent approach considering the political reality of the country, it was not sufficient to reflect the impact of junta ruling on everyday life and public reaction over military rule. However, still, it sheds some light on the political intention of the film.

Along with political instability, the country's economy was not in a good shape for an extended period. Although per capita income was increasing since the mid of 1970s, it was not sufficient to fulfil the basic needs of the people; approximately thirty-nine per cent of the people lived in poverty (Hossain, 2014). On many occasions agricultural production was hampered by natural calamities, mainly floods, leaving a major section of the population in critical poverty (Bertocci, 1985, p. 164). Moreover, the growing trade gap in the country's international business, unstable remittance flow, and occasional disruption in foreign aid flow further exacerbated the economic crises (Bertocci, 1986). Also, the size of the industrial sector was limited that could hardly accommodate the labour force, especially the educated labour force graduated from higher education institutions (Titumir, 2021, p. 64). Therefore, unemployment among educated youth and their growing frustration was common throughout the 1970s as well as 1980s. After independence, there was high hope among the educated youth that a positive and meaningful change would take place in economy and polity, though it never happened.

Mutual failure of the economic and the political system deepened unrest in the society. Strikes in different sectors, different forms of grave domestic violence including acid attacks, and student clashes in educational institutes became regular news items in newspapers (Bertocci, 1986). In this social context, the protagonist of the movie, Munir—an educated, intelligent and smart young person—fails to secure a job which resembles the unfulfilled demand and desire of the middle class. Moreover, through his eyes, the film portrays an unequal and poverty-driven society where young kids have to collect food from waste bins while nouveau riche people enjoy limitless luxury.

Also, the film depicted the waning status of freedom of expression at that time. The fact is since the mid of 1970s, freedom of expression was curtailed by imposing various restrictions (Muhammad, 2016, p. 117). After the promulgation of the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1973 and the Special Powers Act 1974, freedom of expression was drastically curtailed which was maintained by subsequent regimes through the cancellation of newspaper licences on numerous occasions (Muhammad, p. 119). This sanction on freedom of expression is highlighted in the film when Sumit asks Munir with a sigh if any freedom is there to write the truth while responding to Munir about his recent employment status as a freelance columnist. Thus, it is evident that staying faithful to the history *Dahan* portrayed various anomalies in the existing social system either vividly or subtly.

Raising Political Consciousness among the Audience

One key feature of Third Cinema is building people's awareness to make them act thusly. Wayne (2001, p. 16) argues that Third Cinema should investigate the process by which exploited people become aware of their sufferings and decide to act. Accordingly, he suggests that films can incorporate various questions, learning materials, political activists' interactions, and similar elements. In the film *Dahan*, the central character Munir plays the role of an avid observer. The film informs the audience about their condition through the eyes of Munir. He observes various discriminations at different levels of society. The film shows some people build multi-storied buildings with their illicit income while many live under the open sky, a section of people waste food while the others collect those from waste bins from hunger, some people do not get a job having all the competence while a privileged section enjoys every benefit without being eligible.

Significantly, the film starts with a sequence showing Munir walking through an avenue watching at a construction site where a little girl bearing every aspect of

poverty sitting beside the workers. Later, he comes to know that one newly rich person, Pandob Mia, owns the high rise who is trying to gain power through politics after accumulating huge wealth in an illegal way. In the film, Munir's maternal uncle also criticizes Pandob Mia's activities pointing finger at floating of a political party without sufficient public support. His caustic criticism about the existing socio-political system, sufferings from psychiatric problems caused by unholy politics, and, above all, yet unquestionable commitment for social wellbeing motivates the audience which is important in Third Cinema.

Maternal uncle criticizes those who involve with politics to satisfy their cravings. Thus, the film attempts to teach people about the fundamental goal of politics which is to serve the people. This ideological stance of the film further gets reinforced in his dialogue— "I was also involved with politics, but my only intention was to serve people, not myself!" Through this dialogue, the film educates the audience that the well-being of mass people should be placed at the core of politics. This spirit echoes when he says, "politicians nowadays only think about cities, but not the villages. Is it possible to develop the nation leaving the villagers behind?" His pro-people position is not confined within the national context, it is rather international and global. Referring to countries like Afghanistan, Iran, Vietnam, Kampuchea and Palestine, he asks should the world remain still silent even after watching these: poverty, oppression, child mortality or mass killing? it is unfortunate.

Not only the maternal uncle, this kind of political awareness through questioning the system is evident in central character Munir also. For example, while walking down a road, Munir watches a passenger arguing with a rickshaw puller for fare. When the passenger hits the rickshaw puller, in a close shot, the puller looks straight to the camera as if seeking for justice. This mimed protest in the film is nothing but a technique to raise spectators' consciousness against injustice. Again, when Munir tells his friend Shumit that he is surviving by working as a private tutor and a freelance journalist, Shumit asks with a sigh if the journalists are free to write facts? This reminds the audience that although freedom of expression is a fundamental right, it is being violated under the autocratic ruling. Furthermore, in the film, Munir writes about existing socio-political problems from a critical perspective that media houses do not entertain. Therefore, when one of his articles criticizes the subservient character of the intellectuals, the editor sermonizes that though the topic is relevant, it is not publishable as the readers nowadays want to read stories on sex, violence and crime. Munir's argument about the morbid mentality of the intellectuals that is causing further inequality and unrest is discouraged by an editor,

which substantiates the total failure and fortune-hunting characteristic of the entire intellectual class. Thus, the film successfully incorporated questions, answers, and observations as means to raise people's awareness about the corrupt system.

Critical Commitment in Dahan

One aspect of Third Cinema is it addresses the question of permanent solutions to exploitation and therefore stands with a rational view and ideology. Wayne (2001, p. 18) observes that Third Cinema maintains a critical stance concerning exploitation and works for emancipation without being a propaganda machine or performing as a detached observer. The way *Dahan* portrayed the crises of the system through Munir's lens, exemplifies the film's stand against injustice and quest for emancipation. Therefore, in a class-driven society, Munir struggles for a job being highly educated, passenger exploits rickshaw puller and slum-dwelling kids are deprived of health and education; in addition, price hike, road accident, killing, patriarchy, and many other odds are standard, as depicted in the film.

In Third Cinema discussion, experts like Wayne (2001, p. 21) or Gabriel (1982, pp. 15-18) emphasize on the issues like gender, class and class enemies as well. In relation to this, *Dahan* is a successful project conveying the audience sufficiently about the class difference. Along with numerous visual expressions, the film relied on core academic explanations while discussing class, class difference and class struggle. Therefore, it shows, as a house tutor Munir teaches Ivy about social stratification citing from renowned sociologists MacIver and Page arguing how economy, religion and culture determine individuals' personal and social identity, and thus attempts to make the audiences' understanding clearer about their social status. Also, the struggle of the women under patriarchy is portrayed in many forms. Therefore, being a member of an advanced class, Ivy cannot marry Munir due to class differences and patriarchal restrictions, or, Lina—Munir's sister—experiences limitless stress from her patriarchic surroundings even after being deceived by her fiancé Naser, or Munir sees a husband beats wife as she complains about his indolent nature. Though the wife works the strenuous job of a housemaid for earning bread, she has no right to say anything as the patriarchal society does not allow that. As portrayed in the film, women are exploited in every stratum of the society which refers to the film's stand for the emancipation of the women. In addition, Munir's numerous articles on intellectual bankruptcy, or the depiction of the upper-class's invasion of indigenous culture through the circulation of cheap fun stuff imported from overseas countries also epitomizes the film's anti-imperialist position.

While discussing Third Cinema, citing Frantz Fanon, Wayne (2001, pp. 20-21), focused on the significance of people's participation in social change, including the political party formulation process. This aspect is vivid in *Dahan*. For an exploitation-free society, the film suggests establishing a healthy relationship between the political party and the mass. Therefore, Munir's maternal uncle criticizes the newly formed political parties as they are not organically connected with common people.

Along with depicting the flawed system, the film criticizes individuals' flaws also. Therefore, when a person was shrieking in a snack store due to abdominal pain none of the persons around him seemed worried, some were even joking; even Munir—a very conscious person in the film—was not sufficiently sympathetic to the ailing person. Furthermore, when people found a blood-stained dead body inside a maintenance hole, a man compassionately comments that someone killed him. However, just after that, he urinates on a wall though it is instructed over there not to do that—"Peeing on this wall is a punishable offense". He is not the sole offender, like him, many other people committed the same offense as a large portion of the wall and ground shown wet in the film. Through these shows, the film implies that for achieving a better society not only the system, but the people also need to change them and develop awareness as well.

Cultural Specificity

Issues of culture are critical considerations in Third Cinema. Gabriel (1982, p. 16) observes that two conflicting cultures are dominant in third-world countries; one is the ruling class culture bearing colonial and imperialist aspects, and the other one is the general people' culture. Similar to this critical stance, Wayne (2001, p. 22) contends that along with economic resources, colonizers and imperialists want to control culture also. Therefore, for Gabriel (1982, p. 16), a key concern of Third World filmmakers should be promoting a given society's true cultural facet. Leaning with this standpoint, in relation to Third Cinema Wayne (2001, p. 22) observes "its intimacy and familiarity with culture-both in the specific sense of cultural production (for example, song, dance, theatre, rituals, cinema, literature) and in the broader sense of the word (the nuances of everyday living)".

Dahan attempts to show how foreign culture occupy country's cultural space and at the same time declares its stands for native culture. On a typical night, Munir observes that a group of upper-class young boys and girls dancing wildly with English music that appeared like party nights in western culture. Their attire and

style hardly represent Bangladeshi culture. Not remaining as a silent observer only, in his next article Munir condemns upper-class society for importing such foreign culture that deteriorates cultural values and fuels many forms of crime in the society.

Also, the film emphasized on local culture employing references from native songs and literature. When Munir notices the young boys and girls dancing, he recites a verse from a Bengali poem, *Volcano*, of poet Sukanta Bhattacharya which reflects Munir's frustration over the so-called city culture as well his preparation for a fightback. Significantly, Sukanta Bhattacharya is well known for his stance against British colonialism in Bengal as well as India. Therefore, the incorporation of his verses featured the film's inclination for Bengali culture.

Moreover, Sukanta's portrait in Munir's room implies his deep respect for the poet and further strengthens the film's preference for Bengali culture.

In addition, the film relied on renowned Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore and his artwork. When Munir's friend Shumit cries remembering his late wife, the voice and violin played in the background sounding "*My fine times are gone, shall bear the burden of severance, alone*". Again, when Munir's maternal uncle, after leaving the house due to psychological problems, recites *Where the mind is without fear* from Tagore. Significantly, while reciting this poem he twisted a word deliberately; in place of "let all the mankind awake" he recites "let my country awake". Such conscious improvisation can be explained as the maternal uncle's concern for distressed people of his own country as well as other parts of the globe. In another instance, while explaining social stratification, instead of solely relying on foreign sociologists like MacIver or Page, later in a conversation Munir also refers to *Devdas* of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. Offering the example of the unsuccessful love story of Parvaty and Devdas he discusses the consequences of class difference that provides the audience with further understanding about class and ensures the film's adherence to the Bengali literary heritage.

Furthermore, the film employed painting as a means of delivering messages. In the early part of the film, one passenger beats a rickshaw puller accusing him of demanding excess fare. But the beating scene was not shown in the film. Instead, the film employed a rickshaw painting on a rectangular iron plate hanging behind the rickshaw and effect sound to narrate the scene. The painting portrays one fighter hitting another. Rickshaw painting is a well-known form of urban folk art mostly seen in Dhaka city (Mahmud, n.d., p. 161). Through the inclusion of this

artwork in the film it declares adherence to the country's culture in the struggle for emancipation.

Formal Approaches: *Dahan's* Stand as an Alternative to Traditional Cinema

As political cinema intends to raise audiences' understanding concerning their social identity and existence, it maintains a planned distance from traditional cinema in its formal approaches and, therefore, incorporates techniques that help overcome the formal barriers of conventional cinema. Although Kareem (2021, p. 31) criticizes *Dahan* for not being much innovative in cinematic style, still the film marks a difference from traditional Bangladeshi cinema. For example, although not frequent, at least in two vital scenes *Dahan* offered a direct look of the characters to the camera lens. When a passenger slaps a rickshaw puller accusing him of demanding a high fare, the rickshaw puller looks straight at the camera and throws a question to his surroundings as well as the audience of the film asking *Have you noticed (what happened with me)?*

German playwright Bertolt Brecht was a master in political art and used numerous techniques in his theatre to raise audiences' political consciousness. In his theatre, he instructed the artists directly address the spectators with a view to breaking the fourth wall (Davis, 2015, pp. 86-87), which worked to prevent the spectators from feeling empathy and identifying with the characters and situation of the play and helped them to adopt a critical attitude to the actions in the play (Kellner, 2020, p. 32). In *Dahan*, the rickshaw puller's question to his surroundings as well as the audience with a straight stare on the camera has every possibility of raising the audience's awareness as the composition of this single question is accompanied by a latent follow-up question that asks the audience that after watching endless injustices why you are still maintaining silence. Again, when a child was eating contaminated food from the waste bin, a close shot shows the boy staring at the camera with a malnourished and pale face which is aimed to provoke the audiences' consciousness.

Instead of offering cheap entertainment to the audience, *Dahan* tried to reveal the actual condition of society. The film does not rely on a plot built upon a non-realistic romantic relationship. Rather, it reveals unpleasant facts about romantic relationships in a class-driven society. Therefore, in presenting the Munir-Ivy relationship, it did not offer a happy ending nor did project the relationship as a journey full of happy moments as is shown in traditional films. Likewise, when Lina gets deceived by her boyfriend, she remains quiet and weeps very softly

which is uncommon in conventional films. Instead of a loud or violent expression of frustration, she paints a couple's figure where the female character is herself, while the male figure resembles a dog's face—a way of expressing deep disrespect to someone. Similarly, Ivy did not express her sorrows in an angry manner when Munir denied her proposal.

Also, the film did not offer any song in its narrative, though the incorporation of several songs in a movie is standard in traditional Bangladeshi cinema. Unlike traditional film, it incorporated natural sound that created a reality effect. Two other elements of conventional film narrative—sex and violence—are also absent in *Dahan*. Escapist films aim to distract audience from real life through offering visual pleasure from sex and violence which *Dahan* deliberately avoided. Moreover, it represents female characters in a realistic manner that helps audience to empathize the condition of women in our society; nor the male characters appear on the screen in a heroic manner that is saviour of all the problems. Rather, Munir, the key character, only gets frustrated seeing injustice and inequalities everywhere, but cannot do anything. He does not even express frustration vividly in the entire movie other than in the last scene where he tries to break the barbed fence; it is a big difference of *Dahan* from the traditional non-realist films where heroes can do and undo anything whenever they want. The fact is an individual cannot make a total difference in reality; it is rather the system that controls the whole as well as the parts. Therefore, Munir cannot do anything other than accept all the happenings around him. The film offers an impression that although everybody understands the anomalies but remains passive in playing a role. Such a helpless situation is common when a society is run by tyrants. In relation to this context, the film subtly referred to the condition of Bangladesh society and its people under junta ruling. Thus, denying the established approaches of traditional Bangladeshi movies, *Dahan* offered an alternative film language in telling its story which Espinosa (1997) considers essential for Third Cinema.

Conclusion

Dahan provides a comprehensive portrayal of early Bangladesh's society and politics characterized by poverty, corruption, and political bankruptcy. Concurring with Solanas and Getino's (1970) observation that Third Cinema reveals the truth lies beneath veils, it can be argued that the content and the form of *Dahan* unveiled manifold crises of then Bangladesh state and society and presented to the audience in a classic style. Without giving any direct indication of existing authoritarian rule it subtly established its stand against the system. In portraying

the 1980s Bangladesh, the film maintained historical authenticity in its contents. Therefore, *Dahan* revealed social inequalities and injustice, raised voice against political despairs, intellectual bankruptcy, and restriction on freedom of expression and thus attempted to make the audience aware about their condition to decide their ideal role in this context. Instead of a hesitant position, it offered illimitable support to the oppressed section of the society and declared a nationalistic stance in relation to language, art and cultural artefacts. With unique styles and aesthetics, *Dahan* marked a difference with traditional Bangladeshi films and told its story in a way that stands against authoritarianism and implants a sense of fightback for emancipation among the audience.

Notes

1. In film literature, escapist film means traditional entertainment-based movies that primarily aimed to amuse the audience, instead of offering factual scenario of the reality.

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