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Constructing Womanhood in *Fagun Haway* (2019): Balancing Female Agency within a Patriarchal Narrative

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Abstract

The Language Movement of 1952 was a pivotal event in Bangladesh's history, sparking nationalism that eventually led to independence from Pakistan in 1971. Despite women's active participation in this movement, their contributions have received little acknowledgment in historical narratives. This study examines how the film *Fagun Haway* (2019) portrays the female protagonist in the context of the 1952 Language Movement. Using a qualitative content analysis of the film guided by Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory, the analysis explores whether the film challenges or reinforces gender stereotypes. The findings indicate that while the protagonist's engagement in the Language Movement demonstrates subtle female agency and challenges some stereotypical portrayals of women, the film's narrative ultimately centres male heroism. In *Fagun Haway* (2019), female participation is depicted and valued, yet the male protagonist remains the dominant figure, reflecting an underlying patriarchal bias. This tension between female agency and patriarchal framing highlights the complex negotiation of womanhood in Bangladeshi historical cinema.

Keywords Women; Language movement; Representation; Patriarchal bias; Bangladesh

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Introduction

The Language Movement of 1952 deeply shaped the history of Bangladesh, but unfortunately only a few films have been made about this significant historical event. *Fagun Haway* (2019), a film based on the remarkable Language Movement of 1952, directed by Taukir Ahmed, is an attempt to fill the void. It is rich in cinematic language and representation, featuring characters deeply connected to their cultural roots and energetic in their protest against oppressive forces (Kamol, 2019). The inspiration for making the movie came from the short story *Bou Kotha Kou*, written by Tito Rahman, and it was produced by Impress Telefilm Ltd. The script meticulously depicts the Muslim League-dominated politics and rising communalism in the former East Pakistan, and the dialogues reflect the social psyche of that historical period (Roy, 2019). The narrative of the movie highlights a nationalist consciousness by focusing on the relationship between Bangladesh history of nationalism and identity discourses. It addresses the coexistence of Bengali and Muslim identities and the tension between them, particularly the question of how they could exist simultaneously within Bengali culture in the former East Pakistan during the 1950s (Ferdous & Al Kareem, 2023).

It is said that history is often narrated from the perspective of patriarchal hegemony, and women's glorious contributions are unlikely to receive acknowledgement in society. Although it was difficult for women to participate in public life in a conservative society like East Pakistan, they did not remain entirely inactive during the early stages of the Language Movement, despite religious and social restrictions. In fact, they were the first to defy curfew under section 144 and ignored police barricades to join the movement (Naznin, 2021). They were politically active so as to raise their voice against the unjust decisions made by the former West Pakistani rulers. They made posters, rallied, assembled activists, and chanted slogans in the face of police violence for the dignity of their mother tongue (The Daily Star, 2020). They showed bravery, resilience, and unwavering determination to demand the recognition of Bangla as a state language and to resist the imposition of Urdu (Goswami, 2023). Nevertheless, women's contributions to the Language Movement remain undervalued; consequently, little is known about the valiant roles they played in 1952 (Babul, 2014). In this context, it seems critical to examine how women are portrayed in Bangladeshi historical films, especially in a film depicting the Language Movement, given that women consistently took part in the nation's political and cultural movements (Gayen, 2015).

Mainstream Bangladeshi cinema rarely depicts women as individuals with agency. Most films in this genre construct a stereotypical image of women as passive characters, while male characters serve as the active protagonists (Shishir & Shams, 2017). Dhallywood movies often portray women as weak, compassionate, unobtrusive, sexually appealing, victimised, and dependent, whereas men are depicted as strong, authoritarian, and central characters (Talukder, 2024). Such films depict women as

family-oriented, devoted to their husbands' happiness, and sexually pure, rather than as ambitious individuals in control of their own fate. Directors often cast female characters primarily to highlight their glamour, resulting in the reproduction of a stereotypical image of women (Abedin, 2017). Although the portrayal of women in film has evolved over time, female characters are still presented from a male point of view. This kind of depiction not only perpetuates women's passive role in a male-dominated society but also helps continue the legacy of patriarchal norms (Shaha, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this study is to examine the portrayal of women, with particular reference to the female protagonist in *Fagun Haway* (2019). Specifically, the research asks whether this film portrays women's valiant participation in Bangladesh's Language Movement or simply depicts a typical subordinate female character aligned with the prevailing patriarchal framework. By offering a holistic insight into the complex relationship between women, history, and film, this study seeks to highlight how *Fagun Haway* (2019), a Language Movement film, portrays women's agency and resistance on the silver screen from a historical perspective. To achieve this goal, a qualitative content analysis of the film was conducted using Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory as a framework. This analysis should help readers understand how, and to what extent, the female lead character, Dipti, mirrors the image of women in the 1950s.

Research Questions

This study will explore the following two research questions:

1. How does the female lead character, Dipti, reflect the socio-political context and status of women of the early 1950s?
2. How does the movie construct the female protagonist, particularly in terms of women's role and agency in the Language Movement?

Research Background

Birth of Bangladesh as a Sovereign Nation

Bangladesh, formerly known as Bengal Province, was a portion of India under British rule from 1757 to 1947. When India and Pakistan got independence in the form of partition in 1947, Bengal was added to Pakistan and given the new name of East Pakistan (Bulbul, 2011). Based on the unfeasible 'two-nation theory', the two Muslim-majority locations of the subcontinent i.e., East and West Pakistan constituted Pakistan. This notion was based on the ideology that the Hindus and Muslims of the subcontinent needed separate states, which was first proposed by Allama Iqbal and later led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah (Choudhury, 2008). However, after the partition, the refusal to accept Bengali as a state language of Pakistan, financial discrimination, the hegemony of the West Pakistani ruling

elite, periodic imposition of martial law, and a demeaning attitude towards Bengali culture embittered relations between the two wings (Zakaria, 2019). West Pakistan also maintained control over various administrative, military, linguistic, civil, and financial functions to the detriment of the interests of the East Pakistanis, which eventually led to the birth of Bangladesh through a bloody war of independence in 1971 (Saikia, 2004).

Language Movement (1948-1952)

After the India-Pakistan partition of 1947, a question arose about what would be the state language of Pakistan. Muslim scholars and leaders asserted that Urdu, which was spoken by 47% of the population, should serve as the lingua franca, whereas Bangla was the mother tongue of 56% of Pakistan's total population (Abedin, 2016). Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the First Governor-General of Pakistan, after coming into power announced that Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan at a meeting in Dhaka on March 21, 1948, which sparked the beginning of the Language Movement among the Bengali speakers (Ahmed, 2018). The Language Movement had two phases, with the early stage occurring in 1948 and the last stage in 1952. There was only one demand during the first stage with a single slogan—‘We want Bangla as the state language’. During the last stage, on February 21, 1952, police open-fired and killed students and protesters in Dhaka University area, who were demanding an official declaration of Bangla as a state language (Rafique, 2021). The brutal news of young students being killed spread swiftly across East Pakistan and ignited a mass uprising among the Bengali speakers. The people from all walks of life expressed solidarity with the Language Movement and participated in the protest, which eventually led to the recognition of Bangla as a state language of Pakistan in 1956 due to intense pressure (Alam, 2023). It is said that the Language Movement paved the way for the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, encouraging Bengalis to embrace a culture-based national identity beyond religious and class divisions (Khan, 2021). On 17 November 1999, UNESCO declared 21 February as the International Mother Language Day as a manifestation of global acknowledgment of the sacrifices (Reza, 2019).

Construction of National Identity in Bangladeshi Cinema

The Liberation War of 1971 has frequently appeared as a symbol of collective pride on the silver screen in Bangladesh. By portraying the physical and psychological struggles of the war, and the traumas of conflict, Bangladeshi cinema began its journey with the intention of manifesting this event as the identity of cultural expression, national memory, and pride. In this context, local filmmakers generally use the Liberation War to portray a national experience of belonging and identity that goes beyond race, religion, caste, and class (Akhter, 2014b). Notably, it was 1970 when for the first time the collective ambitions for constructing a new national and cultural identity were represented on screen in the movie *Jibon Thekey Ney* (1970), even before the independence. Renowned film director Alamgir Kabir

mentioned this movie as being the ‘first nationalistic revolutionary’ film of Bangladesh (Alam, 2022). It used real events and the shared experiences of Bengalis in a metaphoric form of fiction (Akhter, 2014a). Similarly, in the film *Fagun Haway* (2019), Bengaliness is shown as the dominant cultural identity, especially when the debate over the state language turns into a struggle for existence. The cultural and linguistic identity of Bengaliness ultimately takes precedence over all other identities, whereas Muslimness is portrayed as a form of rigid religious identity (Ferdous & Al Kareem, 2023).

Art cinema in Bangladesh has played an active role in the ongoing debate over Bengali Muslim identity for several decades. During the 1970s and 1980s, the ideas of national-cultural modernity and Bengali identity were often positioned in opposition to Islam and Muslim identity in post-colonial Bangladesh (Raju, 2008). Meanwhile, in the late 1970s, mainstream commercial cinema tended to depict Islam in a positive way, framing it as a non-political, popular element which apparently has no conflict with modernity. In contrast, art films were more likely to portray religion as a source of communal tension and an anti-modern force, reflecting Islam as being in conflict with both global modernism and secular nationalism (Raju, 2010). Nonetheless, the highly acclaimed film of Tareque Masud, *The Clay Bird* (2002) [original title - *Matir Moina*], stands out by highlighting the plurality and diversity of the notion of identity. It reveals the tension between Bengaliness and Muslimness—two dominant identities—but visibly favours popular religion, the third identity approach (Haq & Balraj, 2010).

Rationale for Selecting the Film

Fagun Haway (2019) was chosen for this study because it revisits the history of the 1952 Language Movement—a significant event that initially articulated a sense of Bengali nationalism and later paved the way for the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Its cinematic representation provides a lens to explore how the film navigates the intersection of gender, agency, and nationhood in a broader context. The film, therefore, becomes an important cultural text for its potential to highlight the often-overlooked contributions of women through historical narrative and cultural production. By examining the female protagonist, Dipti, the study attempts to determine whether her character embodies agency or conforms to subordination in the process of national identity formation. Another reason for limiting the study in just one film is that the number of films based on the Language Movement is featured by its rarity, particularly the ones that feature women as the protagonist highlighting nationalism and identity dynamics.

Literature Review

Gender Representation in Liberation War Films of Bangladesh

Several studies were conducted on gender representation in the 1971 Liberation War films of Bangladesh. Bulbul (2011) applied Stuart Hall's representation theory to comprehend how the Liberation War's cinematography depicted the war, nation, gender, and sexuality. This study examined ten movies, including mainstream films such as *Ora Agaro Jon* (1972), *Megher Onek Rong* (1976), *Kalmilata* (1981), *Aguner Poroshmoni* (1994), *Joy Jatra* (2004), and *Guerilla* (2011), as well as independent films such as *Agami* (1984), *Nadir Nam Modhumoti* (1995), *Etihaas Konya* (1999), and *Matir Moyna* (2002). Results demonstrated that these films relied on gender stereotypes, depicting male characters as strong warriors and protectors of the nation, whereas women were shown as weak, passive, vulnerable, and merely the bearers of national honour. Additionally, the depictions of sexuality in these movies reinforced patriarchal social norms intertwined with nationalist discourses. Similarly, Gayen (2015) investigated how women were portrayed in Bangladeshi Liberation War films, finding that women were never depicted as freedom fighters. Interestingly, the raped women were barely portrayed as human beings—they had to either die or become insane or disappear. Only a few women in exceptional cases were able to come back to a normal life due to the kindness of the men in their lives. Akhter (2016) examined the film *Guerrilla* (2011) to understand the portrayal of women in Liberation War films. This study posited that although the female protagonist was portrayed as a freedom fighter, the film was unable to avoid a patriarchal ideological framework, which was found particularly in its notion of a woman's chastity as the fundamental aspect of femininity. Moreover, Bilkis, the female protagonist, combines both tradition and modernity in the historical setting of 1971. Rafi (2011) discussed how the Liberation War films *Guerrilla* (2011) and *Meherjaan* (2011) redefined women's representation in the socio-cultural environment of Bangladesh. According to this study, these two films magnified women's roles and gave a compelling voice, by narrating a distinct look, introducing "newness", and encouraging the audience to "think otherwise" (p. 3).

Portrayal of Women in India-Pakistan Partition Films

Sarkar (2021) investigated Ghatak's Partition trilogy—*Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komol Gandhar* (1961), and *Subarnarekha* (1965)—to highlight the experiences of women refugees who crossed the border and were trying to transform into their new identity in the aftermath of Partition. According to this study, diverse female characters were portrayed across these three films to capture varied female perspectives as they navigated the consequences of displacement and identity reformation after the forced migration. Mukherjee (2017) examined Ghatak's film, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), exploring how the Partition and the patriarchal social system shaped the lives of East Bengal refugees. The findings of the study showed how Nita, the female protagonist, became a symbol of countless refugee women striving for survival and self-identity in post-Partition Bengal. It was found that Ghatak

contrasted Nita's sacrifice for her family with her exploitation at their hands, reflecting broader societal injustices. Similarly, Mukherjee (2016) examined another of Ghatak's films, *Subarnarekha* (1962), arguing that the film subtly narrates the tragedy of post-Partition refugee women through skilful cinematic techniques which combine melodrama and realism. Sengupta (2019) used a feminist lens to comprehend the conventional portrayal of women, particularly those abducted and sexually oppressed during the Partition, in Bollywood films such as *1947: Earth* (1999), *Pinjar* (2003), and *Khamosh Pani* (2003). Results demonstrated that the female body was often portrayed as a site of national conflict and served as a cinematic metaphor for territorial and political struggles, revealing how nationalism redefines female subjectivity. Sengupta and Rathaur (2018) analysed how women were constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in the Partition based Indian films through a content analysis of four films, one from each decade from the 1980s through 2018: *Tamas* (1988), *Earth* (1999), *Pinjar* (2003) and *Qissa* (2013). They highlighted the uncelebrated and forgotten women heroes of the Partition films, their contribution, sacrifice, and desire to live without losing their own dignity and honour. Sengupta and Ganjoo (2023) investigated how such films represent female protagonists' agency, and whether this agency aligns with or rather challenges patriarchal ideology in popular Hindi films from 1990-2020. Following Feminist theory, this research posited that in the selected films women could exercise their agency within the boundaries of patriarchal norms through utilizing their own minds and voices when required. Sawariya and Jha (2020) examined how Partition films depicted the saga of Partition, as well as women's experiences during the nation-making process. They addressed the issue of the infliction of patriarchal practices on women's bodies in the broader context of the dark desires of macho-nationalism through the intersectional analysis of texts and subtexts of the selected Hindi films. Gupta and Gupta (2018) analysed how contemporary (post-2000) Hindi commercial cinema like *Pinjar* (2003), *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001), and *Veer-Zaara* (2004) portrayed women during the 1947 Partition of India. By reading the selected films through these lenses of communal, familial, and national injustice, they concluded that despite the injustices experienced by the women characters in the films, they found ways of empowering themselves.

Gendered Depiction of War in Cinema in a Global Context

Walsh (2004) posited that Western cinema predominantly depicts war as a male-gendered space, reflecting the battlefield history of twentieth-century warfare. According to this study, the war films always prioritised a male point of view, masculine initiation rituals, and male spectatorship. Furia and Bielby (2009) applied contextualized visual semiotics to analyse the gendered representation of women in mainstream military films produced in the United States over a 70-year period. Results demonstrated that either these films portray women's standing as uncertain at best by reinforcing their exclusion from many nontraditional feminine roles or by setting them up for reintegration into proper gender roles. Riabov (2017) discussed gendered discourse to understand how the American enemy was framed in

early Cold War Soviet films between 1946 and 1953. It was found that cinematic representations of US femininity, masculinity, love, sexuality, and marriage played a pivotal role in constructing external and internal enemies. Interestingly, these films also portrayed images of good Americans who aspired to satisfy gender norms of the Soviet way of life. Williams (2003) focused on how Hollywood's Vietnam War genre, from 1977 to 1987, constructed the racial discourses of American imperialism through a masculine or feminine division. Results highlighted the complex relationship between racial and gender discourses and their role in the remembrance of the Vietnam War. Similarly, de Cacqueray (2010) investigated transformation in the gender depiction, specifically women's and men's roles in British films released during the Second World War: *Went the Day Well?* (1942), *Millions Like Us* (1943) and *A Canterbury Tale* (1944). It was found that traditional stereotypes were drastically made, even though women were portrayed to have more authority, supreme power still continued to belong to masculine prerogative. Sitter (2013) aimed to explore the portrayal of violence and masculinity in Hollywood war films released between 1946 and 1950 during World War II. According to this study, the war significantly influenced censorship in America, and contributed to the redefinition of masculinity through the combat films. Jeffords (2012) examined how women were depicted in American films about the Vietnam War. Result demonstrated that women's images were employed not only to advance the narratives of Vietnam War films, but also to bring the stories home, to impress their messages upon the viewers of Vietnam films. Most importantly, women's image became the ideological matrices from which the Hollywood Vietnam theatre established its image of the audience—an audience that the dominant society desires to construct as inactive, subservient, manipulable, and afraid—in other words, feminine.

Methodology

The study was carried out in two phases. The first phase highlights women's contributions to the 1952 Language Movement to contextualise this historical event in Bangladesh. The second phase examines how *Fagun Haway* (2019), a Language Movement film, narrates women's agency and resistance in the socio-cultural context of 1952. Additionally, this study aims to determine whether this film portrayed women in a stereotypical manner or redefined the contested gender construction. To achieve this goal, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to explore how womanhood is constructed in the film. Priest (2010) defines qualitative content analysis as being more focused on latent content, allowing for a deeper consideration of the subtle structures within arguments and narratives (Priest, 2010). The qualitative findings were then analysed following the six-step thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), this approach employs six stages for analysis: familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and lastly developing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

It should be noted that the female protagonist's role in the film narrative is the primary focus of interpretation here. The key traits of the female central figure (Dipti) were scrutinised—through analysis of her character, dialogue, behaviour, and actions—to understand how she reflects the status and agency of women in 1952. Supporting female characters were excluded from analysis because they do not appear to engage in the Language Movement within the film's narrative. To provide a comprehensive overview of the female character's portrayal, this study also discusses the female protagonist's relationships with other characters in the film. The table below lists the main female character (Dipti) who is the object of study in this research and the other three characters (male) for an in-depth understanding about their name, profession, and relationship with the main character.

Table 1. Characters discussed in this study

SL	Character (reel name)	Character (real name)	Profession	Role of character	Dipti's relationship with the other character
1.	Dipti	Nusrat Imrose Tisha	Medical college student	Female protagonist	Self
2.	Nasir	Siam Ahmed	University student	Male protagonist	Love interest
3.	<i>Appeared as an unnamed character</i>	Abul Hayat	Doctor	Supporting male character	Grandfather
4.	Jamshed Ali Khan	Yashpal Sharma	Police	Male antagonist	Harasser/ Oppressor

Theoretical Framework

The film *Fagin Haway* (2019) was analysed through the lens of Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory. According to Hall (1997), representation is a crucial part of the process by which meaning is constructed and shared between members of a culture. It does entail the use of language, signs, and images that stand for or represent something. The process by which language constructs the meaning of the concepts in our minds is regarded as representation. More specifically, representation is the use of language to convey something meaningful about, or to represent the world in a meaningful way to other people. Meaning is what makes us feel a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we belong—so it is closely related to how culture is utilized to distinguish and maintain identity within and between groups. We give objects, people, and events meaning through interpretation, which we bring to them. In representation, constructionists posit that we employ signs that are organized into various languages in order to communicate with people in a meaningful way. Signs can be used by languages to symbolize, stand for, or allude to objects, people, and events in the so-called “real” world (p. 28). In other words, it is the connection between concepts and language that allows us to refer to either the ‘real’ world of objects, people or events, or to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events (p. 17). They can also reference abstract concepts, fantasy worlds, and other imaginary things that are not in any obvious sense part of our physical world. There is no straightforward relationship of

reflection, imitation or one-to-one connection between language and the real world. The world is not correctly or any other way reflected in the mirror of language and the language itself does not function like a mirror. For convenience, we refer to the different representational systems that create meaning as “languages” (p. 28). Meaning is created by signifying—i.e. meaning-producing—practices.

The representation theory seems to be significant for this study because it allows us to understand how the central female figure was constructed in the historical context of Bangladesh. Hence, this research follows Hall’s (1997) representation theory as a theoretical framework to analyse how the female protagonist mirrors the status of women back in the early 1950s. Moreover, this research attempts to comprehend whether this film portrayed the valiant participation of women in the historical event or constructed the most typical form of stereotypical subordinate women from the echo of patriarchy.

Synopsis of Fagun Haway (2019)

The movie narrative sets back in the early 1950s to reflect the historical and political context of the era. In the very beginning of the movie, the main protagonists Dipti (Nushrat Imrose Trisha), Nasir (Siam Ahmed), and antagonist Jamshed Ali Khan (Yashpal Sharma) are first shown arriving by a ferryboat at the outskirts area of Chanranagar, East Pakistan on December 23, 1951. Jamshed Ali Khan was being transferred to the Chandranagar Police Station as a punishment posting. Nasir and Dipti arrive in their village Chandragar to spend winter vacation on the same day. Dipti is depicted as a first-year medical college student, and Nasir as a third-year student at University of Dhaka. They join a local theatre group to perform Dinabandhu Mitra’s anti-British play *Nil Darpan*, symbolizing the oppression of Bengalis by West Pakistanis. During the preparation of theatre performances, Dipti, a Hindu woman, and Nasir, a Muslim man, come to know each other and gradually fall in love. Thus, they develop a romantic relationship despite coming from different religious backgrounds, which metaphorically represents religious harmony prevailing in the Bengali community. On the other hand, Jamshed Ali Khan, a Pakistani police officer, treats everyone cruelly, oppresses them, and insists that the Bengali people must speak Urdu. He also demonstrates utter hatred towards anything related to Bangla language and threatens and pressures everyone into learning Urdu. He even finds it intolerable when a bird sings in Bangla and forces the bird to learn Urdu. He hires a *Maulana* (Muslim priest) to give Urdu lessons to the local people. Meanwhile, the theatre troops engage with the Language Movement and raise their voices in opposition to the police officer’s decision, who intends to see Urdu as the state language of Pakistan. Nasir and Dipti’s fellow activists advocate for protecting Bangla, the honour of their mother tongue. When Jamshed’s oppression becomes unbearable, the villagers unite to resist him and demand the right to speak Bengali. At the end of the movie, Jamshed, the oppressor, flees from the village due to fear of death.

Results and Discussion

Dipti's role in the movie is initially presented as that of a compassionate woman, and it gradually evolves into a complex figure embodying ambiguity, cultural consciousness, and a rebellious spirit. The film establishes her as a first-year Dhaka Medical College student from an elite Hindu family, who is calm, autonomous, and self-assured with strong moral values. In her childhood, her mother passed away, and her father moved to London; later, she was brought up by her grandfather and learned the concepts of love and equality from him. The filmmaker transforms her path while working on the stage adaptation of Dinbandhu Mitra's anti-British play *Nil Darpan*, where her persona is portrayed as a Language Movement activist. Her character is portrayed as a blend of traditional identity and modern mentality, emerging as a progressive woman in the early 1950s.

A Passive Protagonist amid the Patriarchal Structure

The film endeavours to position Dipti as subservient by portraying Nasir as the more rational thinker in the deck scene. For instance, when he asks her what might be the advantages of keeping a wild bird imprisoned in a cage, she agrees with his logic and releases the bird, which frames her as a less sensible character (Figure 1). This dynamic subverts her potential as an independent thinker, illustrating her inability to evaluate situations and make decisions independently. By showing her actions as influenced by the male protagonist, this scene illustrates the filmmaker's attempt to position her as a passive figure who follows his logic, while Nasir is the source of knowledge and reason, which ultimately reinforces the patriarchal ethos of differences in agency and authority in terms of gender.



Figure 1. Dipti Frees the Caged Bird, Agreeing with Nasir's Logic. Screenshot from *Fagun Haway* (Ahmed, 2019)

In the subsequent scene, police officer Jamshed gets angry when the *Baul* character sings a Bangla song of Lalon Shah, the most prominent mystic poet of the region. Jamshed shows his anger although the Baul modestly confesses that he cannot sing Urdu songs and only knows traditional Baul songs (a musical genre). Yet, the officer slaps him. Nasir's immediate protest against this oppressive action shapes his character as a central figure. On the other hand, Dipti remains silent despite witnessing

everything, which again frames her as a passive figure in contrast to the dominant active male characters (Figure 2). This scene constructs Nasir as an active agent of justice and resistance, while Dipti's silence and inaction make her a secondary observer in the background. To accentuate the gender power difference, where women are often subdued and marginalized in the narrative, this film portrays her limited participation and visibility in the conflict. In line with Hall's (1997) representation theory, it is apparent that the filmmaker deliberately amplifies the male protagonist over the female character by making him the focal point of the narrative, which firmly aligns with the patriarchal narrative in the movie.



Figure 2. Dipti, as a Passive Character, Watches the Conflict between Men. Screenshot from *Fagun Haway* (Ahmed, 2019)

An Embodiment of Intelligence and Cultural Consciousness

She is always dressed in a manner that meticulously mirrors the appearance of a young Bengali woman in the mid-20th century. A devoted granddaughter, a theatre performer, an educated and progressive woman, and a singer of artistic calibre – all of these traits are combined in Dipti's character. These characteristics enhance her image as a strong, culturally conscious woman who emerged during the days of the Language Movement. In several scenes, she is shown singing as well as playing a sitar, a manifestation of her musical talent (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Dipti Depicts her Singing Talent. Screenshot from *Fagun Haway* (Ahmed, 2019)

In a subsequent scene, the police come to take her grandfather, a doctor, to treat the Officer Commandant (OC). She tells her grandfather that she will also go with him because she does not want him to go alone at night, signifying devotion. When the OC speaks with her grandfather in a way that demonstrates his authority and power, Dipti protests against it (Figure 4). The dialogue of this scene is as follows:

Grandfather : You are perfectly alright. It was not necessary to bring me here tonight.
Jamshed : I am an officer commander. You have to come here when I call you.
Grandfather : I am not your servant.
Jamshed : This is my area and you have to be okay with that.
Grandfather : Look, officer, I am a physician. I am nobody's employee. Remember it.
Jamshed : Shut up! You have to do whatever I want.
Dipti : Excuse me! What kind of behaviour is this? No gentleman can speak like this with my grandfather. Show some respect to the elderly.
 (Ahmed, 2019, 00:22:28–00:23:08).

In this scene, Dipti's ability to speak English while protesting against the Pakistani OC's oppressive attitude sets her apart from typical Bengali women of her time. Her outspoken character and compelling voice are apparent in the conversation, implying a rebellious female figure. Unlike a conservative woman's image, her independence and subversive traits implicitly pose a challenge to the dominant patriarchal figure. Although her silent presence in the conflict between Nasir and Jamshed (OC) in the previous deck scene places her in a subordinate position in the context of the scene, the next scene subtly displays female agency and resistance. However, she expresses her outrage at the officer's haughty behaviour and is harassed by him in several scenes of the film.



Figure 4. Dipti Protests When Jamshed Talks to her Grandfather in a Disrespectful Way.
 Screenshot from *Fagun Haway* (Ahmed, 2019)

Another scene features Dipti and her grandfather discussing how the Bengali people will never accept Urdu as Pakistan's state language. They then recite *Deshlai Kathi*, a poem by Sukanta Bhattacharya that criticises world hegemony and speaks to the bourgeoisie. It symbolizes matchsticks

as proletariats with the potential to burn down hierarchical social systems. Dipti's recitation of the poem reveals a rebellious trait in her character, expressing her deep desire to live independently with rights and respect. Applying Hall's (1997) theory, it is evident that the filmmaker deliberately constructed her role as an intelligent, ambitious individual with a compelling voice.

Construction of a Progressive Woman within a Patriarchal Framework

Another scene depicts Language Movement processions and rallies, where both men and women participate and demand the recognition of Bangla as the state language of then Pakistan. Nevertheless, the subsequent scene (Figure 5) magnifies the agency of the male protagonist, Nasir, by portraying him as the leader of the protesters, while relegating Dipti to a passive, less-important supporting role in the scene. This scene clearly reflects a patriarchal narrative that marginalises women's activism and leadership, suggesting that men were more active than women in that historical period of Bangladesh. This is consistent with Hall's (1997) representation theory, which argues that media often promote fabricated narratives that appear real (Hall, 1997). The filmmaker constructs a selective narrative that centres men in history while portraying women in supportive roles.



Figure 5. Dipti, as a Subordinate Character, Stands Silently and Supports Nasir's Leadership.
Screenshot from *Fagin Haway* (Ahmed, 2019)

In the following scene, the OC asks the theatre group to meet him because they organized a procession against the Pakistan government. The female theatre troupe members are frightened and refuse to go to the police station, but Dipti agrees to go, positioning her as a bold character who breaks conservative gender norms. However, when the theatre group arrives at the police station, Dipti is sexually harassed and subjected to a voyeuristic gaze by the Pakistani police officer (Figure 6), symbolising patriarchal domination over the female body. The oppressive male gaze transforms her from an agent of resistance into a sex object, reflecting her being reduced to a submissive figure. Although her willingness to visit the police station initially portrays her as a courageous figure, the sexual harassment implicitly undermines this agency, emphasizing how her feminine identity becomes a site of subjugation and an object of male desire. Her agency as a woman is challenged and threatened by the male authority figure. The action highlights how patriarchal structures use sexual intimidation to

silence a bold woman by suppressing women's engagement in the political space. The juxtaposition of resistance and subordination within patriarchal constraints is vividly apparent here.



Figure 6. Dipti is Gazed at and Harassed by Jamshed. Screenshot from *Fagun Haway* (Ahmed, 2019)

Tension Between Losing Love and Political Responsibility

In the last part of the movie, when Dipti's grandfather decides to move to India due to the unfavourable political and religious climate in East Pakistan, she becomes disheartened, as she will no longer be able to see her love interest, Nasir (Figure 7). Her relationship with Nasir is obstructed by her Hindu identity, leading to emotional suffering and a sense of submission amid a broader societal conflict. This situation further intensifies the tension between her fear of losing her lover and her sense of responsibility to the Language Movement.



Figure 7. Dipti Expresses her Fear of Losing Nasir. Screenshot from *Fagun Haway* (Ahmed, 2019)

In the last sequence, Dipti and her grandfather are seen leaving East Pakistan sitting inside a car. Meanwhile, the movement gets intense on the street, so she seeks permission from her grandfather to join the procession. He allows her to go. Her motivation to join the protest signifies her political awareness and her commitment to the collective good of society. Her participation in the procession (Figure 8) demonstrates women's contribution to the historic struggle to establish a linguistic and cultural identity in former East Pakistan. By portraying Dipti's engagement with the Language

Movement, this film elevates her character as an authoritative figure beyond the patriarchal narrative or stereotypical image. Although the filmmaker depicted her as a subdued figure earlier, this scene marks her first steps toward agency and a meaningful contribution to the collective action. Drawing upon Hall's (1997) representation theory, it can be said that the film does portray women's contributions to this historically significant event, although the female protagonist is constructed in alignment with a dominant patriarchal framework.



Figure 8. Dipti Joins the Language Movement. Screenshot from *Fagun Haway* (Ahmed, 2019)

To summarize, the filmmaker portrayed Dipti's engagement with the Language Movement in several scenes. The film narrates how a young Hindu woman belonging to the then Bengali elite class gets involved in the Language Movement against the Pakistani government, and how her engagement with a theatre group makes her fall in love with Nasir, a young Muslim man. Unlike a stereotypical and conservative representation of women in Bangladeshi cinema, Dipti's character highlights the struggle, resistance, and contribution of women to social, cultural, and political transformation. Her intelligence, determination, and commitment to engage in intellectual conversation and support the Language Movement express a subtle form of female agency. Her independence and ambitious traits implicitly challenge and break down the pervasive stereotypical women image.

Conclusion

The Language Movement of 1952 witnessed the emergence of nationalism and recognition of a distinct identity as Bengali, which later laid the groundwork for the Liberation War of 1971 and ultimately resulted in the birth of Bangladesh as an independent and sovereign country. Women fought alongside their male counterparts in every historical arena of society; nevertheless, their contributions have received little acknowledgment in male-dominated spaces. Hence, the purpose of this study was to analyse how the historical drama film, *Fagun Haway* (2019), portrayed women's participation in the Language Movement of 1952. By examining the intersection of women, history, and film, this study shows that the film consistently attempts to construct Dipti as an unconventional character, unlike the

typical Bengali women often featured in Bangladeshi historical films. Her character combines a traditional identity with a modern mentality that emerged in the early 1950s; therefore, it would be inadequate to deem her merely an orthodox Bengali woman. Her political consciousness and passion to engage in the Language Movement position her as a valiant character. The filmmaker, albeit in a limited way, endeavoured to redefine gender roles by elevating a progressive female character with a compelling voice. Thus, the film incorporates a broader perspective, breaking down the widespread stereotypical representation of women on the silver screen. Although the movie ostensibly aims to avoid gender-biased representation, the filmmaker ultimately magnifies the male protagonist as the central figure while relegating the female character to a supporting role. Consequently, the narrative cannot escape the dominant echo of patriarchal hegemony.

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