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Cut-Pieces as Stag Film Bangladeshi Pornography in Action Cinema

Lotte Hoek

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, I spent a year in Bangladesh at the national film industry in Dhaka to write an ethnography of film production and consumption. I arrived with a proposal to ‘follow the thing’ and earnestly set off to investigate the contours of this dilapidated public enterprise.¹ Not long into my sojourn at the Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (FDC) I started to see the jagged edges of the apparently coherent object, cinema, that I was trying to track. Production was divided into public and behind-the-scenes activities, moth-eaten versions of action films arrived for censorship, and in cinema halls entire swathes of celluloid seemed to be missing from sequences, dialogues split up by jump cuts. My methodology paid off when I realised that a single film existed in many versions, expanding and retracting depending on the inclusion or exclusion of particular scenes known as ‘cut-pieces’.

Cut-pieces are short strips of celluloid featuring sexually explicit imagery made illegally within the Bangladesh film industry. Cheap action flicks turned out to be vehicles for illegal pornographic scenes. These scenes are known as ‘cut-pieces’ because they are cut out of a film before submission to the Bangladesh Board of Film Censors. After receiving its certificate, cut-pieces can be restored surreptitiously to the reels.

When I studied the distribution and reception of these Bangladeshi action movies in late 2005, I realised the countryside was awash with cut-pieces. Projection rooms in village cinema halls had film tins full of cut-pieces from second-run films; Friday morning shows were especially well attended when word had spread about the latest cut-piece vehicles; and spirited metropolitan journalists overcame their fear of the countryside to chase up offending cinema halls, indicting such moral depravity in their columns in the Friday supplements.

The cut-piece could elegantly explain the survival of an uncompetitive public enterprise run by bureaucrats in times of media globalisation

1. George E Marcus,
*Ethnography through
Thick and Thin*, Princeton
University Press, Princeton,
NJ, 1998

2. Linda Williams, *Porn Studies*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC–London, 2004
3. *Ibid*, p 6
4. There are other forms of Bangladeshi pornography, such as written Bengali pornographic stories, or *chotis*, which have a long history (see Muntassir Mamoon, 'A Search for Dhaka's Grub Street or Colportage-mart', *Journal of Social Studies*, 93, 2001, pp 13–47), and thrive in print and online. Other forms of pornography are sexually explicit video recordings of village theatre (*jatra*) songs and dancing girls associated with the 'puppet theatre' (*putul nach*). As elsewhere, there is private and surreptitious imagery shot with video cameras and, increasingly, mobile phones.
5. Linda Williams, *Hard-core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989; Eric Schaefer, 'Gauging a Revolution: 16 mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature', *Cinema Journal*, 41:3, 2002, pp 3–26; Gertrud Koch, 'The Body's Shadow Realm', in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*, ed Pamela Church Gibson, London, BFI, 2004, pp 149–64; Thomas Waugh, 'Homosexuality in the Classical American Stag Film: Off-Screen, On-Screen', *Sexualities*, 4:3, 2001, pp 275–91
6. Williams, *Hard-core*, op cit, p 36
7. Eric Schaefer, 'Gauging a Revolution', op cit
8. Gönül Dönmez-Colin, *Women, Islam and Cinema*, Reaktion Books, London, 2004, p 140
9. Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* [1981], trans Myrna Godzich and Walid Godzich, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1987;

and piracy. As a medium of representation and social text, however, I struggled to analyse the cut-pieces. What was it that I was seeing in these clips?

If porn studies has established itself as a fertile and exciting field of cinema studies,² its focus until now has been overwhelmingly restricted to the West. Film scholars working on Muslim majority societies have yet to engage seriously with hard-core cinema in countries such as Bangladesh. Colleagues have repeatedly expressed amazement at the fact that such an object as the cut-piece actually exists in Bangladesh. It is to dispel such amazement that this paper was initially conceived. Linda Williams has noted that there is a 'tendency to dismiss the textual working of popular pornographies' despite the fact 'there is a great deal to say about the quality and kind of the generic deployments... of precisely these performed acts of copulation'.³ In this article I will address such generic deployments in Bangladeshi hard-core cut-piece pornography in Bangladeshi popular cinema and outline its aesthetic conventions.⁴

PORNOGRAPHY AND SOUTH ASIAN CINEMA

The history of cinema overlaps with the history of pornography. Linda Williams, Thomas Waugh, Eric Schaefer and Gertrud Koch have pointed to this continuity in the Americas and Europe.⁵ As Linda Williams puts it: 'the desire to see and know more of the human body... underlies the very invention of cinema'.⁶ Cinema's current transformations also cannot be considered independently of the continued attempts to display the human body in sexual activity.⁷ There are other reasons to study pornography and to take its aesthetics seriously. Pornography flaunts transgressions and thus sheds light on the rules it so blatantly tries to break; its narratives and aesthetics are structured by key social anxieties and inequalities of race, gender and class; it speaks of bodies and sensibilities in ways inaccessible in other cultural forms; and it illuminates the organisation of fantasy in society.

Academic discussions of pornography in Muslim majority societies are rare. Dönmez-Colin mentions Turkish 'sex comedies' but does not discuss them.⁸ Others have addressed the matter from an ethnic minorities and Western race-relations perspective in which Muslims feature as fetishised Others in a hegemonically white world.⁹ Studies of non-Western pornography, on the other hand, tend to emphasise surprisingly isolated cultural universes from which 'other' expressions of sexuality spring, such as explicit Japanese manga.¹⁰ Neither of these approaches captures the possibility of a pornography not staged for an imagined Western audience yet participating in the aesthetics of international mainstream pornography. The cut-pieces can provide a privileged location to study such pornography.

While eroticism and changing moral orders have a prominent place in the study of South Asian cinema,¹¹ hard-core cinematic pornography remains undiscussed. Soft-core pornography has drawn limited attention.¹² This reluctance to investigate hard-core pornography in South Asia derives from an apparent agreement amongst scholars of South Asian cinema (largely focused on 'Bollywood') that there are clear limits on the display of sexuality in South Asian cinema. This consent results

- Maxime Cervulle and Nick Rees-Roberts, 'Queering the Orientalist Porn Package: Arab Men in French Gay Pornography', in *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, 6:3, 2009; Royce Mahawatte, 'Loving the Other: Arab-Male Fetish Pornography and the Dark Continent of Masculinity', in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*, ed Pamela Church Gibson, BFI, London, 2004, pp 127–36
10. Deborah Shamon, 'Office Sluts and Rebel Flowers: The Pleasures of Japanese Pornographic Comics for Women', in Williams, ed, *Porn Studies*, op cit, pp 77–103
11. Rachel Dwyer, 'The Erotics of the Wet Sari in Hindi Films', *South Asia*, 23:1, 2000, pp 143–59; Rosie Thomas, 'Melodrama and the Negotiation of Morality in Mainstream Hindi Film', in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed Carol Breckenridge, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996, pp 157–82
12. Bhrigupati Singh, 'Aadamkhor Haseena (The Man-Eating Beauty) and the Anthropology of a Moment', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 42:2, 2008, pp 249–79; S V Srinivas, 'Hong Kong Action Film in the Indian B circuit', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 4:1, 2003, pp 40–62; Sanjay Srivastava, *Passionate Modernity: Sexuality, Class and Consumption in India*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2007
13. Mushtaq Gazdar, *Pakistan Cinema 1947–1997*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1997; Preben Kaarsholm, ed, *City Flicks: Indian Cinema and the Urban Experience*, Seagull, New Delhi–Calcutta, 2007; Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*, Routledge, New York–London, 2002; Zakir Hossain Raju, 'Bangladesh:

from three intersecting currents. First, the 'trash' of South Asian cinema goes largely without mention. Most studies deal with high-end productions from established producers with star actors.¹³ These films are studied as texts. Such studies evade analyses of cheap features screened in single-screen *mofussil* (provincial) theatres on 'third-run' releases.

Second, the reigning assumption is that hard-core imagery in cinema halls is effectively policed by censorship regulations.¹⁴ Even in his excellent discussion of the C-circuit of film distribution in India, Bhrigupati Singh suggests that a show may contain 'roughly about three–four minutes of seminudity (since full nudity and actual love-making are strictly prohibited by the censors) in a two-hour film'.¹⁵ I will read the opaque 'full nudity and actual love-making' to mean hard-core pornography. Singh's work is very valuable in making these circuits visible, but his text features hard-core imagery only as a prohibition, thus abiding by the Indian state's proscription on making visible 'full nudity'.

Third, cinematic pornography in South Asia is often associated with semi-legal foreign features of the fabled 'morning show'. In Bangladesh too, old prints of foreign pornography circulate in 'third-run' cinema halls until they fall apart. In my experience, they draw full halls in small towns and are relatively uncontroversial, if frowned upon. Sustained analyses of such 'morning shows' and the type of imagery they show are lacking.

In the remainder of this article I will discuss cut-piece pornography after briefly sketching its arrival on the Bangladeshi cinema scene.

THE BANGLADESH FILM INDUSTRY

Mainstream cinema in Bangladesh is organised through the Bangladesh Film Development Corporation (FDC), a public enterprise under the wing of the Ministry of Information. The FDC compound in the middle of Dhaka brings together all film-making facilities, from the lab to dubbing studios. The state owns the production facilities and rights to trade in raw stock; government employees man the lights and maintain the cameras while state bureaucrats head the FDC. Registered producers receive access to these facilities upon payment of a certain amount and after mortgaging their reels to the FDC until the final bills for use of the facilities are settled and the film may be released.¹⁶ All popular Bangladeshi cinema is made within the FDC structure.¹⁷ It is also from within the FDC's production framework that action films and their controversial 'cut-pieces' are made. Bangladesh does not have tiered certification or distribution circuits for cinema. Instead, all Bangladeshi films are either certified for general distribution or not certified at all. The cut-pieces are not submitted to the Bangladesh Board of Film Censors and are therefore illegal.¹⁸ By sidestepping this blanket regulation, the cut-pieces can include any uncensored material.

Since the mid-1980s, cinema in Bangladesh has seen a generic shift towards action cinema,¹⁹ paralleling Indian and Pakistani cinema.²⁰ The new action films thematised the rapid social transformations under way in Bangladesh. The main audience for these films was thought to reside outside the two major cities of Bangladesh, Dhaka and Chittagong, and to consist mainly of men. The reasons for the shift to action films are

A Defiant Survivor', in *Being and Becoming: The Cinemas of Asia*, eds Aruna Vasudev, Latika Padgaonkar and Rashmi Doraiswamy, Macmillan, Delhi, 2002, pp 1–25; Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History*, Permanent Black, Delhi

14. Brinda Bose, *Gender and Censorship*, Women Unlimited, Delhi, 2003; Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002. Clearly, Gopalan's analysis of 'coitus interruptus' marking the representation of sex in Indian cinema does not apply to these Bangladeshi cut-pieces, in which the camera does not withdraw or 'cut away'. For a discussion of this particular point, see Lotte Hoek, 'Cut-Pieces: Obscenity and the Cinema in Bangladesh', doctoral dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2008, p 140.
15. Singh, op cit, p 260
16. In 2009, the incoming Director General of the FDC was taking steps to cancel this arrangement for so-called 'P-films'.
17. Only telefilm and arthouse films are able to remain at a certain distance from this national studio.
18. Lotte Hoek, 'The Mysterious Whereabouts of the Cut-Pieces: Dodging the Film Censors in Bangladesh', *IIAS Newsletter*, 42, 2006, pp 18–19
19. Mirza Tarekul Qader, *Bangladesher Chalachitra Shilpa [The Cinema of Bangladesh]*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1993; Raju, op cit
20. Gazdar, op cit; Ravi Vasudevan, 'The Exhilaration of Dread: Genre, Narrative Form and Film Style in Contemporary Urban Action Films', in

manifold and interrelated. Besides depicting stories from the rapidly growing Bangladeshi cities, it resulted from the arrival of video; increasing political unrest making public spaces less desirable for middle-class families; the rise of television, which not only poached audiences but also drew in young would-be film-makers; the shift of young avant-garde film-makers to different formats; and state control over the film industry.

Amongst the most prolific of directors of action films in the Dhaka film industry in 2005 it was understood that without cut-pieces the investment in an action film would be lost. Working on low budgets and often with dilapidated state-owned technologies, they could not compete with cheap Chinese VCD players and the satellite channels that bring the world's TV channels to the remotest of villages. Bangladeshi action and sex was the niche market that action directors tapped into through the cut-piece.

CONCEPTUALISING THE CUT-PIECE

What could be an appropriate theoretical framework for analysing the cut-piece? The literature on American stag films provides a comparative case.²¹ Many of the characteristics of early American stag films coincide with those of the cut-piece. Briefly, the stag films, like the cut-pieces, were cheaply produced, anonymous and undated films that displayed hard-core sex-acts; they were illegal; screened to groups of men, made by men, and revolved around the display of the female body. I therefore turn to the analysis of the stag film to understand the cut-pieces.

I do not want to suggest that America's past is Bangladesh's present. The cut-pieces are a product of the contemporary global media-scape and are informed by a globalised porn aesthetic. I do not think that the cut-pieces are just another example of progressive 'on/scenity' that all societies eventually pass through.²² Instead, as I will argue below, the cut-pieces are an effect of a particular moral discourse accompanying social transformation in Bangladesh and expressive of a certain pattern of gender inequality. However, overlapping generic conventions and remarkable coincidences in production and consumption of cut-pieces and stag films warrant a parallel analysis. I will discuss the analysis of the aesthetics and imagery of the cut-pieces in four parts: production values, gender and nudity, rape and class conflict.

PRODUCTION VALUES

When encountering Bangladeshi pornography online or on the VCDs on which short scenes of sexually explicit imagery of diverse origins are compiled, the clips are immediately recognisable due to their production values. One of the first indications of the importance of these production values came early in my fieldwork. Having moved into a flat not far from the FDC, I told my new landlord and landlady in Dhaka what my research was all about. Their recently married son joined the conversation. A dedicated worker with the Tablighi Jamaat religious movement, the bearded young man in white could not contain his ribald laughter as

he compared the film actresses to elephants. ‘They’re not paid for their acting skills’, he cried, ‘but according to weight. The fatter the girl, the fatter the cheque!’ Such excitement about popular Bangladeshi cinema accompanied many of its aesthetic conventions, including dress, sets, cinematography, acting styles and even actress size. It is the look of mainstream Bangladeshi cinema that causes much excitement, both approving and disapproving.

The technologies of film production at the FDC shape the cut-pieces. The peculiar colour quality of the fragments is a result of the lighting techniques used by most FDC cameramen, the film stock used and the lab facilities within the FDC. Besides aesthetic values on the part of the cameramen, lighting practices maximise the limited funds available for lighting. Working on very tight budgets, producers rent as few lights from the FDC as possible. Most scenes use four lights (which can be one, two or five kilowatt), all tungsten, with high colour temperatures creating yellow and reddish colours in the image. Sometimes these are supplemented with ‘daylight’ lighting. These HMI (Hydragyrum Medium-Arc Iodide) lights have a low colour temperature and produce a bluish colour. The lights are used in a variety of mixes, generally with the intention of creating as much light as possible. Rather than bouncing light off white surfaces, all lights are aimed directly at the subjects in front of the camera, creating a harsh and flat image without shadows. Using a mix of Fuji and Kodak film stock, the colours are not consistent throughout a single film, or sometimes even within a single sequence. Rarely are cameramen given the time to colour correct properly when the negatives are printed, which also contributes to the changes in colour within a single film. Similarly, the long-term re-use of lab chemicals takes the edge off vibrant colours. The clandestine nature of cut-pieces exacerbates all these processes as it necessitates rapid shoots by junior camera- and light-operators working with fewer lights, quick printing and without colour correction.

Editing practices for action cinema add a second layer of distinctiveness to the cut-pieces. There is no practice of *découpage* for action sequences, including rape scenes, and often it is the action director who directs such sequences. The editing team decides how to piece fight and chase scenes together. The small budgets for such films do not allow for the use of transitions or fades. The effect is one of staccato jumps between shots, exacerbated by the way in which action films are screened in Bangladeshi cinema halls. Sexually explicit material may be added to a print of an action film in a haphazard manner, depending on the conditions within the theatre in which the illegal material is being screened. With the frequent splicing, as well as the worn projection equipment in the Bangladeshi cinema halls, film prints are rarely in an unscathed condition. The bruises show on the celluloid and second-run films, which are even more likely to contain cut-pieces, are particularly heavily scratched, creatively re-edited and often miss parts of sequences. The sudden appearance of the cut-piece in often fragmentary forms, oddly placed within the narrative flow of the movie, all contribute to the particular aesthetic of the cut-piece.

The frisson produced by the cut-piece is not only a result of the genital display I will discuss below. Rather, the production values of the cut-piece itself induce a certain excitement. Sanjay Srivastava has argued that the very fuzziness of the imagery in the cheap pornographic magazines sold

Kaarsholm, op cit,
pp 223–4

21. Williams, *Hard-core*, op cit; Waugh, ‘Homosexuality’, op cit; Constance Penley, ‘Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn’, in Williams, ed, *Porn Studies*, op cit, pp 309–32
22. Williams, ed, *Porn Studies*, op cit, p 3

on the footpaths of Mumbai is appropriate to the type of excitement they aim to generate.²³ He suggests that the visual efficacy of the D-grade image relies not on visual realism but on a play on fantasy. Similarly, the allure of the cut-piece derives partly from its material form, its colours, its fragmented form and haphazard screening. Pornography is what Linda Williams calls a 'body genre',²⁴ primarily addressing itself to our senses. This, combined with the gritty imagery of often unsteady quality, its sudden appearance and fragmented montage, produces an excess of meaning that makes the cut-pieces resonant at a level beyond mere information transfer. Middle-class derision of the 'bad quality' of Bangladeshi mainstream cinema that is often expressed in everyday chats in Dhaka should not be seen as a rejection per se, but rather an indication of its distinctiveness. The production values of the cut-pieces guarantee a socially depreciated material form that ensures a frisson of social difference and play on fantasy through its release from visual realism.

NAKED WOMEN AND DRESSED MEN

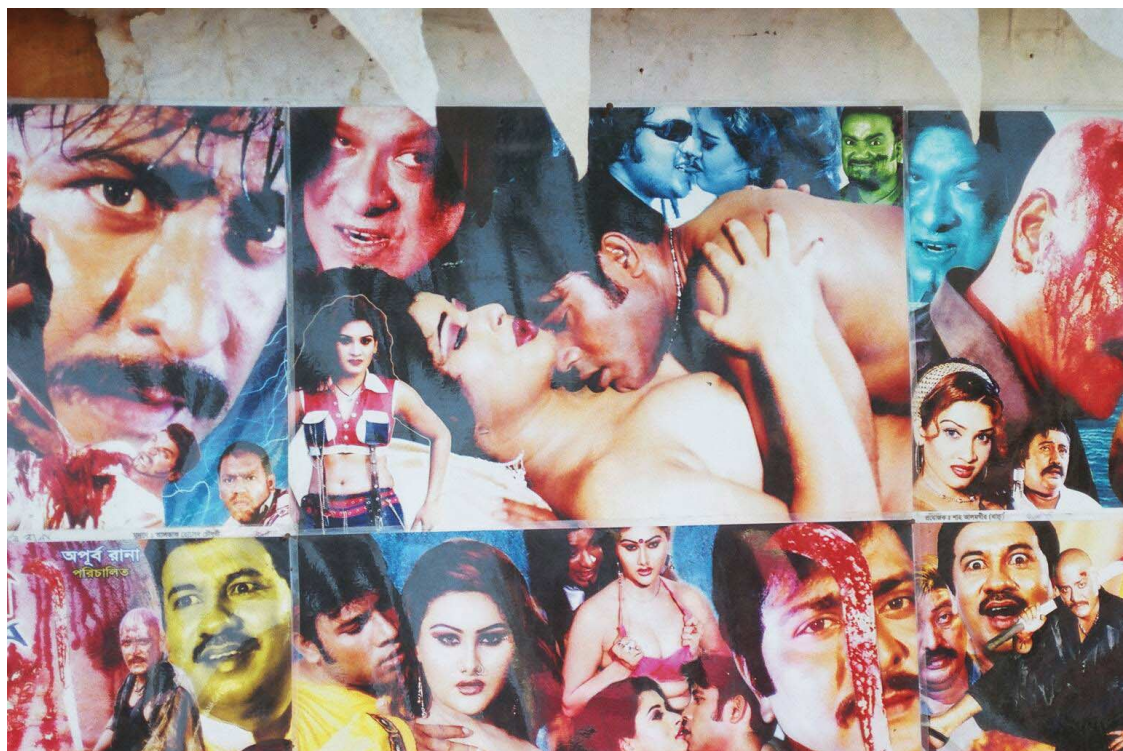
During production, cut-pieces are written into the script. There are conventional points within an action movie when cut-pieces can be spliced into the main body of the film. I call these points 'hooks'. In the script hooks are marked at the end of the written scene by opaque phrases such as 'move to romance' or 'bedroom scene'. Such hooks indicate particular types of scenes, such as song sequences performed by a hero and heroine or a villain and dancing girls; bathroom or bedroom scenes following upon a dramatic encounter between a hero and heroine; and rape scenes. A film can be screened without the sexually explicit material and often such scenes are cut in such a way that a chaste and an explicit version of the same sequence can be shown. In this section I will discuss the hard-core imagery of song and bedroom scenes; in the next section I will address rape scenes.

The pornographic elements in song and bedroom scenes are comparable. In the case of the song sequence, the sexually explicit material is often intercut with the non-explicit form of the same song sequence, alternating between long and medium-long shots of the dancing actors and close-ups of the actresses' covered breasts, buttocks and crotch. Spliced into this is the sexually explicit imagery of the same actors or of unrelated performers. This sexually explicit material is shot within single rooms, often a bedroom or a bathroom, where a fully dressed actor undresses an actress down to her panties and subsequently kisses and licks most of her body. Often foodstuffs, such as honey, aubergines or tomatoes, are used on the body and as metaphors for the sex act (tomatoes are associated with rape, aubergines with female lust). These scenes are set to Bengali film music or instrumental versions of pop songs. Actresses in the industry call such scenes 'most commercial'. Scenes in which the female genitals become visible – imagery we can define as hard-core pornography – are often called 'dirty' (*nongra*) or obscene (*osbilil*) by the actresses in the industry.

What is it that can be seen in 'dirty' or hard-core Bangladeshi scenes? In terms of the representation of sexual activity, the actress generally does not stimulate the actor's body but enacts sexual pleasure through

23. Srivastava, op cit, 2007, p 182

24. Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, 44:4, 1991, pp 2–13



Photoset accompanying action film in North Bengal, 2005, photo: Paul James Gomes



Single frame of found positive footage of a cut-piece showing a rape scene

her facial expressions. These include rolling her eyes upward or closing them, opening her mouth and moaning or pinching the whole face as in intense concentration. Except for vaginal penetration shots, the penis remains largely out of sight. Rather than the ubiquitous external ejaculation of Western pornography, the camera's gaze and the actor's activities focus solely on the female body. What Linda Williams has called 'the frenzy of the visible', 'the visual, hard-core knowledge-pleasure',²⁵ relates only to the female body in Bangladeshi cut-pieces. More often than shots of vaginal penetration, Bangladeshi pornography shows close-ups of cunnilingus performed by men dressed at least from the waist down. The 'frenzy of the visible' in such shots is heightened by the local custom, commonly understood by actresses to be based on Qur'anic injunctions, to keep the genital area cleanly shaven. The resulting narrative closure of the sexual act relies less on the seen male orgasm than on the show of the female genitals in sexual activity.

The representation of sexual activity in the cut-pieces resembles that of the stag films discussed by Waugh.²⁶ Both cut-pieces and stag films avoid showing male bodies while displaying naked female bodies to communicate satisfaction. Both are short and mobile forms of cinema, made and consumed by men in groups. Waugh argues that the intense effort to avoid showing male bodies in the stag film should be understood as 'the obsession of patriarchal culture with... the female sex'.²⁷ However, in Waugh's analysis, the stags do display male bodies to male spectators and are 'tenaciously engaged with the homosocial core of masculinity'.²⁸ The covering up of the male body is an attempt to disavow the fact that 'the collective rituals of male homosociality are blatantly and inescapably homoerotic'.²⁹

Can Waugh's analysis be used to understand the cut-pieces? Certainly, the dense homosociality on the set of Bangladeshi action movies, of the narratives produced there, as well as the entirely male spectatorship in the cinema halls also have their homoerotic elements. But how can these be understood within the cultural construction of sexuality within Bangladesh?

Scholars of South Asia engaged with sexuality stress the complex interactions between sexual identities and practices in South Asia and the transnational languages of LGBT and the field of queer theory.³⁰ Vanita and Kidwai argue that there was no radical disruption of the homosocial continuum, no disjunction between homosociality and homosexuality in India, until anxieties around heterosexuality arose in colonial times. Zahid Chaudhary, in his discussion of J R Ackerley's *Hindoo Holiday* (1932), suggests that 'while Chhokrapur is patriarchal, its homoerotics merely becomes yet another configuration of a polymorphous sexuality – given the fluidity between male homosocial and homoerotic bonds – rather than a threat to patriarchy'.³¹

My research in the rural cinema halls in Bangladesh has confirmed some of Chaudhary and Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's expectations. As I was completely incapable of eliciting any form of reflective statement about watching cut-pieces within cinema halls, I focused my audience research on mapping the ebb and flow of excitement as it spread through cinema halls screening action films.³² These halls full of men did not, as Linda Williams predicted 'sit in an embarrassment of silence punctuated by laughter and crude jokes'.³³ Instead, the appearance of the cut-piece

25. Williams, *Hard-core*, op cit, p 36
26. Waugh, 'Homosexuality', op cit
27. Ibid, pp 276–7
28. Ibid, p 277
29. Gagnon and Simon in Waugh, ibid, p 279
30. Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya, eds, *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, Seagull Books, London–New York–Calcutta, 2007; Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, Palgrave, New York, 2000
31. Zahid Chaudhary, 'Controlling the Ganymedes: The Colonial Gaze in J R Ackerley's *Hindoo Holiday*', in *Sexual Sites, Seminal Attitudes: Sexualities, Masculinities and Culture in South Asia*, ed Sanjay Srivastava, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2004, pp 83–98
32. Hoek, forthcoming, 'Unstable Celluloid: Film Projection and the Cinema Audience in Bangladesh', in *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 1:1
33. Williams, "'White Slavery' Versus the Ethnography of 'Sexworkers'", in Williams, op cit, p 129

would dip solidly male audiences into sudden silence and concentration, only to release itself in loud cheers and whistling when the short porn reel came to an end and the action narrative re-established itself. If Vanita and Kidwai and Chaudhary are right, and the cut-pieces are not watched against a backdrop of an anxiously maintained ruptured homosocial continuum, then there is nothing to be embarrassed about.

Instead, the disavowal of the male body in the cut-pieces must be related to the form of Bangladeshi patriarchy. The cut-piece display of the female body in this sense ‘narrates’ masculinity as a disavowing of male embodiment. This can be related to the more quotidian fact that women are always already constituted as sexual due to their exchange in reproductive institutions such as marriage. Marriage entails moving a woman through public space from one household to another in the institution, which ensures social reproduction.³⁴ Weddings publicly reflect female sexuality in the act of being given in marriage to another family. Male sexuality is never exposed as such, as ‘the self-identity and perpetuation of... domains of unmarked masculinity require that they be rigorously sealed off from the realms of privacy and sexuality’.³⁵ The bright red dresses of Bangladeshi brides, as against the placid beiges of their grooms, underscore this point. Cut-pieces reproduce this disavowal of male sexuality. They locate sexual pleasure in the female body and not in the male. In this representational logic, the cut-piece resembles stag films which focus on exposing the female body. What can become visible in cut-pieces as sexual imagery is the naked female body as the stage for sexual pleasure. In avoiding the display of male bodies to male spectators, male embodiment is disavowed and patriarchal culture confirmed.

RAPE SCENES

Linda Williams has engaged with Waugh’s analysis of the stag film and noted the peculiar sartorial divisions. As she says, ‘men seem to cover up all the more as the women become naked’.³⁶ Her analysis, however, does not focus on the disavowal of homosexual desire. She suggests that:

... if the penis is crucial and must be shown to confirm that actual penetration... does take place, the rest of the male body is under no such similar compulsion to be put on display.³⁷

She suggests that the different availability of the male and female bodies in stag films displays ‘a kind of punishment on the women for having sex in the first place’.³⁸ Where Waugh sees a defence against a danger posed to the heterosexual identity of the male spectator, and a destabilizing factor in the potential eruption of difference, Williams sees an indictment of the transgressive female.

In terms of the Bangladeshi cut-pieces, the latter analysis certainly does seem to be in synch with the organisation of cut-piece narratives which feature women in two types of situations: passionate love affairs and rape scenarios. In both cases, female characters are sketched as engaged in sexual activities without the promise of wedlock and are punished for their transgression by death.³⁹ The moral universe of these action movies mirrors a patriarchy in which sexual activity may be

34. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans Rodney Needham, James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1969; Gayle Rubin, ‘The Traffic in Women: Notes on the “Political Economy” of Sex’, in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed Rayna Reiter, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1975, pp 157–210
35. Rafael Sánchez, ‘Intimate Publicities: Retreating the Theologico-Political in the Chávez Regime?’, in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, eds Hent de Vries and Lawrence E Sullivan, Fordham University Press, New York, 2006, pp 401–26
36. Williams, ‘“White Slavery” Versus the Ethnography of “Sexworkers”’, in Williams, op cit, p 113
37. Ibid
38. Ibid, p 114
39. I kept track of the films around in 2005 in which such female protagonists stayed alive. I only managed to find two (*Nosta Meye* [*Despoiled Girl*], directed by M A Rohim, 2005 and *Nishiddho Nari* [*Forbidden Woman*], directed by Mohammad Hossain, 2004), both of which were immediately banned by the Bangladesh Board of Film Censors on the grounds of obscenity.



Still from a cut-piece. The female body is the location of sexual pleasure



Still from a cut-piece. The actress enacts sexual pleasure through her facial expressions

initiated by men and received by women, forcibly or otherwise. Women who are sexually available to men to whom they do not belong by marriage or descent will be punished for this transgression by death. In this, the mainstream action movies use a narrative device that is common to high- and low-brow texts in Bangladesh. Plays and novels often rely on a similar purging of sexually transgressive females to restore the moral order.⁴⁰ In art films, raped women generally commit suicide or are killed.⁴¹ Recent Bangladeshi middle-class hit film *Monpura* (Gias Uddin Selim, 2008), which ran successfully over fifty weeks, ends as every mainstream FDC film does: with the death of the young woman who dares to initiate a romance on her own account.

The sexually explicit cut-pieces associated with rape scenes are shorter than bedroom or dance sequences. They are not set to music but at times are accompanied by house beats. The narrative mostly stages the rape of a female side-character. The camera angles alternate between long shots detailing the pinning down of the female character by one or more men, generally generic villains, and close shots of the female body as it struggles and is overcome. The main shots are close from above onto the female stomach or chest, and shots from the side showing naked legs rubbing against each other in struggle and feigned intercourse. Such shots may be intercut with hard-core close shots of vaginal penetration. More frequently, the act of rape is depicted by the struggle, the ripping of the women's upper garments and the display of the breasts. The male actor remains fully clothed in most rape scenes and his actions involve the licking of the actress's breasts and the pinching of her face. The end of the scene is announced by the disappearance of the male actor from the scene and the death of the raped character. She may be killed by the rapist, but far more common is suicide or death in cross-fire at the climactic ending of the film. When the rape scene is a cut-piece embedded in a relatively random manner (for example because it is a scene in the possession of a projectionist and spliced into a film at will) the end of the scene will be formed by a jump-cut back to the main narrative of the film. In this case the death of the female character may be skipped altogether.

The representation of the rape and death of female characters articulates the subordinated position of women within society. To understand the rape scene as a particular form of sexually explicit cinematic material, however, also requires placing these scenes in their Bangladeshi production context. In the remainder of this section I will pick up two elements of this context, namely censorship regulations and the figure of the *birongona*.

First, censorship regulations explain why rape scenes are so common as an entry point for sexually explicit material in Bangladeshi cinema. The Bangladesh Censorship Act, Code and Rules provide an elaborate framework of rules listing permissible cinematic representations. Amongst the imagery forbidden by the Censor Board are those of 'immorality' and of 'crime'.⁴² Immorality may not be shown on Bangladeshi screens. Crime may be shown as long as a life of crime is not glorified or unpunished. This means that the display of loving but explicit sexual relations between partners always constitutes illegal imagery (because it is 'immoral'), while the display of rape may constitute legal imagery as long as it is not glorified or unpunished (because it is a 'crime'). In practice, then, censors are

40. Naila Kabeer, 'The Quest for National Identity: Women Islam and the State in Bangladesh', in *Women Islam and the State*, ed Deniz Kandiyoti, Macmillan Press, London, 1991, pp 115–43; Dina M Siddiqi, 'Bangladesh: Sexual Harassment and the Public Woman', 2002, *Himal Magazine*, May, <http://www.himalmag.com/2002/may/analysis.htm> (accessed 14 December 2007)

41. Dönmez-Colin, op cit, 2004, p 83

42. See Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, *A Manual on Censorship of Films Act, Rules and Code with Amendments; Cinematograph Act and Rules, with Amendments; Films Clubs Registration & Regulation Act & Rules and Various Notifications, Orders etc*, Ministry of Information, Dhaka, undated

more likely to cut displays of intimacy between lovers and short dresses than they are likely to expel rape scenes. Thus the rape scene becomes a likely place for the insertion of a sexually explicit cut-piece due to censorship regulations rather than due to a particularly prurient interest in rape on the part of film-makers or audiences.

Second, it can be argued that female sexuality has become publicly attached to the figure of rape in Bangladesh. Lalitha Gopalan has argued that the spate of rape-revenge movies in India in the late 1980s and early 1990s should be read in the context of public contestations around rape legislation.⁴³ In Bangladesh, although many generic elements of these films coincide, the context within which these rape scenes are conceived is different.⁴⁴ Sexual harassment legislation in Bangladesh has been lacking.⁴⁵ The figure of rape is instead intimately associated with the Liberation War of 1971. Women raped during the war were dubbed 'war heroines' (*birongona*) by the government after the war. Nayanika Mookherjee has stressed the historical and political context to understand the way in which rape becomes framed, in this case as a political act.⁴⁶ I would suggest that Bangladeshi film-makers draw on this already established context. However, they appropriate this idiom as a sign of female sexuality. While the term *birongona* attempts to cover over the sexual nature of the now 'heroic' political sacrifice, I would suggest that in fact this is a typical case of what Judith Butler calls the 'regulation that *states what it does not want stated*'.⁴⁷ By state proclamation, the raped woman has become available as a public idiom for female sexuality. Rape becomes a way to speak publicly of female sexuality at the very constitutive moment of the Bangladeshi nation-state.

Thus the representation of female sexuality often comes in the form of punishment, first in rape, then in death. Transgressive female characters are cleansed from the order of patriarchy by death. The burden falls on the naked female body, uncovered by the clothed male in the cut-piece.

CLASS DIFFERENCE

Despite their differences, both Williams and Waugh agree on the question of class difference within the stag film. Relying on Waugh, Williams suggests that 'audiences... tended to be class homogenous ... and take out their class antagonism on women lower down on the social scale than themselves, especially prostitutes'.⁴⁸ In the case of the Bangladeshi cut-pieces, this analysis can be applied, if in mirror image. Producers and scriptwriters self-consciously aim their films at an imagined rural and male audience, glorifying poverty and indicting wealth. Class antagonism is taken out on the urban middle-class woman. While race and ethnicity are rarely thematised in this material; class drives the narrative.

The mise-en-scène of the cut-piece is limited. Generally, the setting indicates a middle-class home. The tiled floors and closed windows of bedrooms and bathrooms suggest air-conditioning and the omnipresent wrought iron indexes middle-class locations. Practically, this is the result of the few private houses conveniently used to shoot cut-pieces. The female characters in them are mostly positioned as urban middle-class girls. They go to school, have leisure time and consumer goods and can be found in middle-class bedrooms or foreign hotels. These

43. Gopalan, op cit

44. And clearly, Gopalan's 'coitus interruptus' does not apply to these Bangladeshi cut-pieces in which the camera does not withdraw or 'cut away'.

45. Dina M Siddiqi, 'Bangladesh: Sexual Harassment and the Public Woman', op cit

46. Nayanika Mookherjee, 'Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body-Politic of the Raped Woman and the Nation in Bangladesh', *Feminist Review*, 88:1, 2008, p 40

47. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, London–New York, 1997, p 130 (emphasis in the original)

48. Williams, "'White Slavery' Versus the Ethnography of 'Sexworkers'", op cit, p 119; Waugh, op cit, p 286

modern venues in combination with sexual impropriety code these female characters as ‘despoiled’ (*noshto*). Urban college girls wearing embroidered *shalwar kameezes* are raped in these films. Similarly, girls who willingly engage in sexual relations in such stories are inevitably extraordinarily wealthy, residing in marble palaces in Dhaka. Wealth eroticises and encourages transgression. On the other hand, sexual violence is often perpetrated by villainous urbanites, especially corrupt politicians who drink alcohol, and by exploitative rural powerbrokers, from village chairmen to religious authorities. In the cut-pieces, then, a fascination with the New Woman is combined with a strong moral condemnation of corrupt public figures, thematising extraordinary class inequalities.

Thomas Waugh discerns ‘a palpable but amorphous populist resentment in stag films’.⁴⁹ Relying on Laura Kipnis’s analysis of the features in *Hustler Magazine*, which she suggests ‘powerfully articulate class resentment’,⁵⁰ Waugh asks, ‘can one detect in these on-screen and off-screen dynamics an ancestor of the class resentment, and the embrace of obscenity and gross out as populist revolt...?’⁵¹ The narrative of the cut-pieces does express an explicit antagonism towards society’s powerbrokers, established institutions and middle-class aesthetic values. The cut-piece films are made by men for men in a patriarchal society, and the women who transgress its moral boundaries are labelled spoiled goods. These women are marked as belonging to a class at a distance from the production and consumption context of the cut-pieces themselves. The fantasy scenario of the endless sexual availability of middle-class and elite girls for one-time consumption elides the truth of the immense class difference within Bangladesh and the rigidities that separate these two.

The aggressive display of middle-class girls as despoiled and the prevalence of rape, as well as the obsessive focus on the female body, effacing much of its subjectivity, can be read as a symptom of an anxious masculinity. The anxiety here is not one of potential homoeroticism but one of labour and class. It needs to be understood in the context of the gendered conflicts over labour in the export-producing economy of Bangladesh which has mobilised a proletarian female labour force and left working-class men largely unemployed.⁵²

The perspective on class relations and inequality offered in Bangladeshi action films is most forcefully articulated at the points where cut-pieces are introduced. The ‘hooks’, as I have described them, are often the moments in the script when social friction is most pronounced. These scenes describe the violent encounter between the rural mother and the exploitative factory owner; the irrepressible passion between the college girl and her working-class beau; the cooperation between the corrupt politician and lecherous mullah. These are the scenes that call for a cut-piece, the naked bodies underscoring the urgency and inherent tension of the scene. The cut-pieces function like songs in musicals and sexual numbers in pornography, of which Linda Williams has suggested that ‘performance numbers woven into narrative... become the key to particularly intense statements...’.⁵³ The cut-pieces are introduced when popular cinema becomes social critique. When ripped out of context, through censorship or exhibition practices, all that remains are conventional idioms and rousing imagery.

49. Waugh, *ibid*, p 286

50. Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1999, p 242

51. Waugh, *op cit*, p 286

52. Shelley Feldman, ‘Contradictions of Gender Inequality: Urban Class Formation in Contemporary Bangladesh’, in *Gender and Political Economy: Explorations of South Asian Systems*, ed Alice W Clark, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1993, pp 215–45; Dina M Sidiqqi, ‘Miracle Worker or Womanmachine? Tracking: (Trans)national Realities in Bangladeshi Factories’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27 May 2000, L-11–L-17

53. Williams, *Hard-Core*, *op cit*, p 131

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have outlined the generic conventions of hard-core pornographic imagery found in Bangladeshi action movies. The application of the insights from Waugh and Williams about American stag film has allowed me to identify some key features of the Bangladeshi cut-piece.

I have addressed four generic characteristics. First, I have argued that part of the frisson produced by cut-pieces derives from their production values. The production context of the FDC endows the cut-pieces with a technologically and socially distinctive material form. Second, cut-pieces show naked female bodies animated by dressed male bodies. This convention arises out of the all-male context of production and primary consumption of cut-pieces. Displaying female sex to male viewers, the cut-pieces disavow male sexuality and embodiment. In this case, the prevalence of cunnilingus to display female sexuality is an indication of the ex-nomination of male sex and presence characteristic of patriarchy where the male is the unspoken and unseen norm. Third, I have shown how the prevalence of rape scenes as hard-core imagery has to be understood in a twofold context of censorship regulations that allow crime but not 'immorality' and the longer history of addressing female sexuality in public through the idiom of rape. Fourth, I have indicated that cut-pieces thematise class difference and that sexually explicit imagery is introduced into the narrative at moments of intense social conflict. Hard-core pornographic material derives its titillating force from, and is used to underscore, the skewed class relations and urgent social tensions structuring the narrative of the action films.