

## Witnessing War on Screen: The Representational Politics of *Stop Genocide*, the First Liberation War Documentary of Bangladesh

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### ABSTRACT

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This paper aims to contribute to the critical study of cinematic representation of war in ensuring ethical documentation as well as to explain how the documentary frame, usually considered a true representation method, uses cinematic strategies to shape public knowledge and understanding about war. Utilising framing as an analytical tool, and following Stuart Hall's cultural representation theory, this paper presents a narrative analysis of Zahir Raihan's documentary, *Stop Genocide*, the first documentary as well as the first celluloid venture of Bangladesh. War documentaries have a special appeal to their audience as the works not only deal with real war, but also create a connection with the audience through the subject's narrative or a sequential structure. Nevertheless, no matter what the subject matter is, either fiction or documentary, both are media of communication. And media representation always follows a filmic language of representation determined by a specific agenda, aiming at a specific audience. Hence, the current research intends to study the Liberation War, based on the first documentary movie of Bangladesh, *Stop Genocide*, and how the documentary epitomises human rights violations and traumatized violence perpetrated against the Bangladeshi people in 1971.

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## Introduction

In 1971, amidst the Liberation War of Bangladesh, exiled filmmaker Zahir Raihan made a 20-minute-long documentary, *Stop Genocide*, the acclaimed first documentary of Bangladesh. *Stop Genocide* represented the trauma and pain of the Bangladeshi people who survived from the Pakistani army's torture and took shelter in a refugee camp in India. It also showed the virility of the Bangladeshi freedom fighters. Comparing the Liberation War with the deprivation, cruelty and atrocity of the Vietnam War and Palestinian War, Zahir Raihan raised the human rights issues violated in Bangladesh's Liberation War. The film mainly targeted the international audience to convey what was happening in Bangladesh. *Stop Genocide* with the 'flavour of Third Cinema' - a form of political cinema dedicated to social and cultural emancipation - received huge appreciation from film critics as well as the general people of Bangladesh for being ahead of its time in the history of documentary filmmaking. However, considering *Stop Genocide* as a significant documentary in the war film genre of Bangladesh, I analyse narratives, representational methods and positioning of gender and sexuality from the verge of its context. I conducted this analysis drawing on Stuart Hall's cultural representation theory (1997). For the examination, I employed visual media and documentary analysis research methods to explore the representational strategies. To collect visual data, I used narrative structure analysis as the primary analytical tool.

## Justification of the Study

My choice to analyse *Stop Genocide* was motivated by the documentary's immense significance as the first cinematic venture in the history of Bangladesh. *Stop Genocide* serves as an early example of celluloid representation, using film to capture and communicate realities of the Liberation War, making it both historically and cinematically significant. Moreover, the immense popularity of *Stop Genocide* among both media critics and general audiences has garnered scholarly attention, prompting an examination of cinematic techniques, narrative strategies, and framing choices to understand how war and war-related issues are constructed.

This paper aims to shed light on the understanding of how *Stop Genocide* serves as both an artistic and political artefact, reflecting the urgency of wartime storytelling and the broader geopolitical dynamics surrounding Bangladesh's fight for independence. Therefore, a critical analysis of this documentary enriches discussions on the politics of cinematic representation and the media's role as a powerful platform in disseminating intended messages.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To theorise representation in *Stop Genocide*, I draw on Hall's work on cultural representation which conceptualizes the process as an assemblage of certain techniques to communicate specific ideas, stories, emotions, or sociocultural values, to give a sense of the real world. Cultural representations directly deal with culture as social relations

of power such as race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, etc. (Hall, 1997). These social relations of power are always context-specific and function as organising principles of social life. The different power relations at operation in any society at any given time are not separate from each other but interrelated/intersecting. They operate on several simultaneous and interlinked or mutually constitutive levels of reality for instance identities, institutions/structures, ideologies, symbols and so on. Hall argued that these systematic operations play the politics of representation. Regarding the politics of representation, Clifford and Marcus's (1986/2023) arguments are relevant for analyzing the documentary, as they demonstrate how authors' (or filmmakers) subjectivity also influences the process of representation. Clifford and Marcus have argued that authorial subjectivity is not free from personal experiences; rather, it is linked to certain positionalities, such as the bourgeoisie ideology, or Western perspectives. Eventually, these intersubjective positions represent the author's perspective rather than providing an objective depiction of culture/community. Therefore, drawing on Hall's representation framework, including Clifford and Marcus's thesis on the role of authorial subjectivity in the politics of representation, the study examines how *Stop Genocide* constructs meaning through its wartime representations. Hall's theory provides the conceptual lens through which the documentaries' representational politics are analyzed, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how gendered and ideological narratives are mobilized within the film's historical context.

### **Methodology and Techniques of Analysis**

I used both visual media analysis and documentary analysis research methods. Visual Media Analysis involves examining and explaining thematic content within media texts to uncover their meaning and impact. A systematic examination of cinematic themes helps reveal various narratives embedded within a dominant theme, which is apparently subtle but fundamentally shapes the visual storytelling. On the other hand, documentary analysis is a qualitative research technique used to decode and articulate meaning from various documentary sources - written, visual, or physical. This technique is especially effective in analysing historical records, policy documents, communication materials, and personal accounts – whether in printed form or as televised or cinematic content. Importantly, it enables analysis without direct interaction with participants.

*Stop Genocide*, as a documentary film, serves as a rich visual documentary resource for analysis. It simultaneously combines cinematic elements such as dialogue, music, plot, and characters with documentary materials including historical narratives, archival footage, and interviews. Therefore, I used both visual media analysis and documentary analysis research methods to examine the documentary *Stop Genocide* comprehensively.

Under the methodological framework, I employed a narrative analysing technique to decode the film's visual composition. This technique involves examining how Zahir Raihan constructs the documentary with a fragmented, non-linear narrative by intertwining together archival footage, symbolic imagery and voice-over narration. I

also analysed elements such as music and commentary to understand the strategies applied to evoke emotion and engage political conscience. These techniques enabled me to develop a detailed understanding of the film's rhetorical techniques and metaphorical visuals, which underpin its moral appeal and nationalist messaging.

### ***Stop Genocide - First Documentary on the Liberation War of Bangladesh***

There are some people who create great pieces of work even in the midst of a war. *Stop Genocide* is such a name in the history of our Liberation War movies. It is a film, a narrative, a documentary. (Raju, 1993/2011:69)

The film convincingly established the genocidal crimes and successfully identified the Bangladesh Liberation War, not as an isolated phenomenon, but as an integral part of the relentless struggle for a better life being waged all around the world by working men and women. (Kabir, 1979:49)

In terms of content, techniques, direction, above all, representation, *Stop Genocide* is an aesthetic film. This film properly represented atrocities done by the Pakistani army, negligence by the world community, the plight of refugees and preparation for the war have been visualized perfectly. *Stop Genocide* is a grand narrative of our Liberation War. Represented from a humanitarian ground, this film helped to mobilize the world community's perception. (Hayat, 2007:140)

These three applauded statements are cited here to give a hint about how the Bangladeshis received and still think about the first documentary film on the Liberation War of Bangladesh. *Stop Genocide* was released while the war was going on July 20th, 1971. In that sense, it is the first among both documentary and feature films. During the war, the Provisional Government of Bangladesh (the Mujibnagar Government), which was guiding the war, felt the need to publicize the cause of Bangladesh to the global community. Film director Zahir Raihan, who was exiled in a refugee camp in Calcutta, India, with his experience of making the country's first ever politically committed film, *Jibon Theke Neya (1970, Glimpses From Life)* that faced multi-level opposition from the Pakistani ruling clique (Kabir, 1979), was assigned to prepare several documentaries. Of them, *Stop Genocide* was the first.

As the film's target audience was the international community, the language used was English. It was translated into Bengali in 1988. This also demonstrates how the film was assessed, and so, after 18 years, it was translated into the country's language with the intention that Bangladeshis could properly comprehend the film's message.

The 20-minute documentary starts with Western music with a title card containing a statement of Lenin (with Lenin's sketch) on the screen from his book *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination (1913)*, meaning the right to self-determination should not be perceived as secession. Then the screen becomes dark, following some long and mid shots representing the daily lives of Bangla as a peace-loving, beautiful land. The next few shots represent atrocities perpetrated by the Pakistani Army unfolding through a chronology of shots, i.e. first, sounds of military boots in a quiet and peaceful land,

second, sound of gunfire, third, sound of crying and fourth, barking of dogs. This sequence of shots ends with a bold onscreen appearance of the title *Stop Genocide*, signifying a pause to the storyline but to grab attention from the international community.

The body of the documentary can be divided into three parts: the refugee, the freedom fighters, and the concluding part. This division can be identified through the image of a teleprinter used between the segments, accompanied by the preamble of the United Nations Charter.

This paper primarily focuses on the representation of refugees, which constitutes the largest portion of the documentary. Yet, I also briefly address two other parts: the portrayal of freedom fighters and the concluding message. The following section will discuss these parts sequentially, first, the representation of Bengali refugees; second, the representation of freedom fighters; and third, the concluding segment.

### **Analysis of Part One: The Refugees**

#### ***Refugees - the Common Character***

Although there were three segments in *Stop Genocide*, it is the refugees who dominate most of the documentary. According to the Indian government, around 8-9 million refugees from Bangladesh took shelter in the adjacent Indian territory while according to UNHCR the number of refugees was around 10 million (UNHCR, 2000:59). It is termed as “one of the worst refugee crises in history by sheer numbers” (Murshid, 2010:12). At the very beginning of the war, India opened its border on Bangladesh’s side and set up several refugee camps in five adjacent border areas i.e. West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. India also operated a training camp for the freedom fighters of Bangladesh in these states. There were hospitals and a nursing centre near the refugee camp and rebel training camp, where the wounded fighters, as well as sick people from the refugee camp were treated. These three branches were interrelated. Amiably, both the Indian government and the general people of India, particularly those who were living close to the refugee camps, did not react negatively; rather, they were sympathetic and cordial in favour of the Bangladeshi refugees and the independence of Bangladesh, although the massive refugee wave put extra pressure on India’s economy and social arrangement. To ensure a positive end to the war, to handle the refugee issue properly and to campaign for world support for Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), the then *Indira Gandhi Sarkar* (India’s central government) gave a world tour where she mainly emphasised the miseries suffered by the refugees. So the case of refugees in India had been considered as a crucial factor for the liberation of Bangladesh, and this also became an indivisible character of the documentary film of the Liberation War.

Covering refugees’ status as a common element is not like that; it is something accidental, or it came just as a fact, as it is a byproduct of war. There are three reasons why the documentary chose the case of a refugee as a must.

*First*, emphasizing refugees in the first documentary movie *Stop Genocide* was to some extent valid from the ground that the movie was made (April – June '71) at the very beginning of the war, so it could be too ambitious for the director to choose the warfront as the main theme. Moreover, the director himself was staying in the refugee camp, which made it more logical. However, other documentary movies, particularly those made before 1975, also revolved around the agonies faced by the Bangladeshi refugees. *Second*, the refugee case has a humanitarian ground; it is more effective to stir up others' empathy. Seeing that a story of war is always a story of 'us' vs. 'them' so the overt intention is to represent the facts of war in such a way that expresses the ravage perpetrated by the occupier (i.e. West Pakistan). *Third*, from the same point of view, it can be said that visualizing refugees might also be a requirement on the part of India, as it was also necessary for India to attain support from the world community. That is why all the documentary movies' language was English or associated with English subtitles. As it is said above, India gave shelter to the Bangladeshi refugees, set up training camps for the Bangladeshi freedom fighters, and most of all gave all types of support in favour of Bangladesh. Thus, there was a claim by the Pakistan government that India was interfering in Pakistan's internal affairs, hence fueling the war. It is worth mentioning that the first phases (before 1975) of the War documentary were mostly financed by the Indian government (Kabir, 1979).

### ***Visual Image of Refugees***

Wartime refugees were represented in three ways: (1) Single-lined mute procession, (2) Specific close-up shots of faces, belongings, etc., and (3) By narrating personal stories of miseries. Visualizing masses walking towards India is a common scene of media representation of the 1971 war. This image was metaphorically narrated as '*Jono Somudro*' (sea of masses), '*Soto Soto Mukh*' (hundreds of faces), etc. "Millions of babies watching the skies, Bellies swollen, with big round eyes, On Jessore Road--long bamboo huts, No place to shit but sand channel ruts" – is the lyric used in *Muktir Gaan* (1995, directed by Tareq Masud & Catherine Masud) as title music. It is the poem September on Jessore Road by Allen Ginsberg, and was used in the documentary translated into *Bengali*. 1971 also used a poem – *They walked.....* while visualising the refugees. Words like '*sea*', '*soto soto*', '*millions*' were used to give an idea about the massiveness, immensity of the refugee exposition. Van Dijk (2015) and Hartmann and Husband (1974) describe the tendency as "number game" arguing that the use of number or the metaphor '*sea*' is fundamentally a practice of media to "unduly frighten those members of the society who are prone to feeling threatened by immigrants/refugees" (in Patterson, 2001:66) although in *Stop Genocide*, *Dateline Bangladesh*, *Muktir Gaan* and in 1971 figures and metaphors were used to steer the media viewer about the violence and brutality perpetrated by the Pakistani army. However, imaging refugees in a large group, walking in a line, gives emphasis on the issue over all; on the contrary, it hides individuality, hence identity, agency, opinions and their histories.

*Stop Genocide*, however, focused on several individual faces - a few with a description about them and a few others conveying the atrocities they witnessed being done by the Pakistani army. These faces include a 90-year-old woman, a 16-year-old adolescent girl and an 80-year-old man. The 90-year-old lady was described as she was looking here and there in the refugee camp for shelter, but there was not “a single inch of room”. This old lady “cannot make her understand that in this last phase of her life, she wouldn’t be able to manage a room for herself” (*Film: Stop Genocide*). The 16-year-old girl was a rape victim, and the 80-year-old man was describing how the Pakistani army had committed a massacre in his village. He chronologically narrated how, firstly, the Pakistani Air Force killed 20 villagers firing from the sky, then the army raped women and killed young men and boys randomly, and most of all, before leaving, they burnt the whole village. This bare-chested old man left a question for the audience (world community), “Why such brutality”?

Interestingly, in this film, age was mentioned very clearly while introducing the characters. And more interesting is to notice which age was chosen to be represented – 90, 16 and 80. When it is about severe helplessness, it is a 90-year-old woman, when it is about a rape victim, it is a 16-year-old girl, and when it is about describing something that demands proper observation, that is an 80-year-old man. Identifying people based on their age means that the director categorised these people on the basis of the time they spend in their lifecycle, and most of all, he might have a meaning for such categorization. Julia Twigg (2009) asserts age as a structuring principle of society, as well as one of the basic sources of identity. She termed ageing as one of the “master identities” (p.5), because based on age, people are perceived, judged and behave. Children and old people are vulnerable and helpless. Although such attributes differ from society to society, in Bangladeshi society, elderly people are viewed and treated as respectful but vulnerable. Keeping in mind their ancestral role for the family and for society, and thinking of them at the end of their biological cycle. They are considered respectful and also need extra care to be taken.

Therefore, old people as refugees refers to the point that those who need extra care are at the last phase of their life, those who are not capable of living their lives, to earn their livelihood are ousted from the country. In a background comment, it was said,

This 90-year-old woman cannot make her believe in any way that, at this last phase of her life, in the midst of heavy rain, she won’t get a room to survive? Fear of death swallows her up. She asks herself, ‘after walking such a long way, leaving behind all of my possessions, leaving behind far away my ancestral homeland, shall I die here in this foreign land? (*Stop Genocide*, 1971)

According to Hall’s encoding-decoding model (1980/2019), this statement decodes the subtle meaning of how this severely frustrated and impoverished group demands a heightened level of empathy.

On the contrary, the absence of young people as refugees suggests that they are on the warfront. Even though director Zahir Raihan was in the refugee camp, he was young

and was not in the condition of an inactive, helpless refugee; rather, he was moving spontaneously with his 35 mm camera. Born in 1935, he was at the age of 35 during 1971, the year of made *Stop Genocide*, which challenged the idea that all young people are combatants and all old people, women and children are refugees. Furthermore, keeping him outside of refugee identity, the director refers to refugees as the ‘other’ that brings everlasting ideological conflict between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The poor, the vulnerable are the other and ‘we’ (us) are the researchers, filmmakers who are representing the other, making comments on them, taking decisions on how they will be taken, sympathized and will be treated by the world.

Another hierarchy was made among the refugees by identifying a woman as a rape victim. She was portrayed in a very stereotypical way as the more vulnerable, exhausted person than the other refugees. The film made a victim-agent binary by differently representing raped women than non-raped. While other women were represented in some activities – cooking, nursing each other's hair, taking care of children, the raped women were seen in a distressed, shocked mood, doing nothing. The way she was described was enthralling – “She is a 16-year-old ‘*kishoree*’ (teenage girl), her father was a businessman in Khulna. *Hanadar Bahini* (Pakistani Army) entered her house during curfew, threw the girl on the floor of the house and ‘*choy jon Army palakrome dhorson kore*’ (six army persons raped her in turns).

Words like ‘*kishoree*’ (adolescent), ‘*choy jon Army*’ (six soldiers) and ‘*palakrome dhorson*’ (rape repeatedly) represent a picturized image of the rape incident. In Bengali culture, a ‘*kishoree*’ is the symbol of innocence, tenderness, and sweetness. It was used to give the audience an idea about the freshness of the girl. On the contrary, repeated use of the word ‘*choy (six) jon*’ army and ‘*palakrome dhorson*’ (rape one after another) gives the audience pleasure in hearing as they can visualize the whole rape incident – how the victim looked like, how sturdy and aggressive the perpetrators were, how and where they performed, how cruel it was for her to undergo.

### ***Torn dresses, Homeless, Penniless and Hungry***

This is the comment used in *Stop Genocide* while describing the plight of refugees, and this is the hackneyed image of the refugee represented in mass media. Zahir Raihan also walked through the Western way of representation by visualising *Bengali* refugees as a mass body, needy and vulnerable. However, in contrast to westernisation, Zahir Raihan highlighted the historical and violent political background that made the *Bengali* refugee.

He put them in their historical context by depicting the history of the richness of *Goura* (ancient name of Bangladesh), bringing reference to the proverbial rhetoric *Sonar Bangla*<sup>2</sup> (Golden Bengal) and then raise questions;

Why are the Bengali refugees today? What is their fault? They are not acquainted with political trickery, so why are they so severely punished? Did any nation or person pay so high merely for casting a vote for their beloved one? (*Stop Genocide*, 1971)

The director further raises questions on the functionality of the United Nations. He asked furiously – “While a universal humanitarian body like the United Nations is active, how come genocides like the Mai Lai massacre in Vietnam happen?” (Ibid) Furthermore, he focused on the individual body, sometimes with a background narration (i.e. raped adolescent), sometimes with speeches from individuals. Therefore, in this regard, the refugees cannot be considered as a speechless entity, or they are not merely consigned to their bodies; rather, the author visualized refugees in their agency. *Stop Genocide* represents an oppositional discourse about refugees.

Nonetheless, what is analogous to representations in *Stop Genocide* and other media is that all are purpose-oriented. It is understood that this documentary is motivated by its objectives - that is, to convey to the world community the message of brutality perpetrated against Bengalis by the Pakistani Army consequently achieving sympathy/world support for the struggle of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. From this point of view, the director represented refugees, their impoverishment. And this is also a way of commodifying the poor Bengalis. For instance, director Zahir Raihan referred to the richness of ancient Bengal and *Sonar Bangla*. This glorification of Bengal is, as a matter of fact, a mythicizing concept. Just to compare the crude reality of British imperialism, nationalist historians (Ali, 1985; Rahim, 1963) used this allegory. They described, “Each Bengali peasant had his barn full of paddy, milk-giving cows huddled in the cowshed and the backyard pond stocked with plenty of fish” (Ahmed, 2004:1). On the contrary, scholars like Khan (1993), Iqbal (2010), Khaled (2013) explore how the politics of representation established the epithet of affluent Bengal and golden Bengal. Yes, there were natural resources like fertile land, plenty of water and mild weather, but the fruit of these resources was enjoyed by the landlords and their associates. Based on economic applied theory, Khan (1993) analysed that, in ancient Bengal, there was famine, slavery and severe poverty. Society was not egalitarian, a strong class system existed, and there were discrepancies in wealth distribution. Underprivileged groups – both in terms of geographical location, poverty and illiteracy – were affected rigorously by natural calamities like floods, cyclones, famine, etc. Thus, slavery was active at the heart of mainstream society, where female slaves were used as sex slaves. There are instances of cheap prices of necessary things, i.e., food, clothes, etc. However, those who were hardcore poor didn’t have the financial liberty to live an easy life even in such cheap land. Prices were cheap because it was

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<sup>2</sup> *Sonar Bangla* is a very common idiom in Bengali oratory. It is also used in the first stanza of Bangladesh’s national anthem.

compared against foreign prices, and it was determined (whether cheap or costly) by those who were capable of buying.

The narrative of affluent Bengal lies in the fact that ancient history was mainly written by foreign tourists who were invited or hosted by the local landlords or emperors. Even the local history writers were also subsidised by the affluent classes. Thus, it was 'natural' that these writers would sing for their master. Moreover, the history writers, i.e. tourists, literate people, were hardly conscious about the subaltern of this area; sometimes they assumed their subaltern life, sometimes they consulted with their associates. That is why Robert Chambers denotes, "In history, rural poverty was improperly represented" (Chambers, 1980: 2). Poor families lived in the periphery – far away from the centre, from the city, even from the brick-built roadside. Tourists mainly visit during the dry season when the roads are convenient to travel on. Ironically, during the dry season, rural poor people also move in search of jobs and seasonal poverty is reduced. So, hardcore poverty was not visible to an outsider. Thus, the true story of the subalterns was outside the history of ancient Bengal.

Subalterns came to the forefront of Bengal's history during the British period, when there were issues of casting votes, and when the subalterns started to move against Colonial rule because it went hand in hand with the political elite's interest.

Director Zahir Raihan ignored the misrepresentation of subalterns in Bengal's history; rather to uphold the miseries of East Bengal's people during 1971, he made a comparison by supporting previous misrepresentations. It may work to create emotion against Pakistani brutality, but it is the other way of commodifying the subalterns – to arouse the desired response.

### **Analysis of Part Two: Representation of Freedom Fighters**

The freedom fighters occupy the 3 minutes and 36 seconds run time of the documentary. This phase starts with marching scenes of soldiers through close-up shots of boots tapping the ground. The scene then shifts from military boots to Bengali civilians' bare feet. The panning shot from bottom to top, portraying civil Bengali freedom fighters marching not in military uniform, but in traditional Bengali wear, *lungi-genji* – a common, informal attire commonly worn by Bengali men. Freedom fighters' visualization was juxtaposed with scenic beauty narrated as "it was a glorious day. The sun was peeking through the banana tree and clusters of bamboo. Birds were singing merrily. The charm of these typically Bengali settings made me forget for a while the grim, bloody battle that was raging all around."

Zahir Raihan repeatedly used this visual metaphor of portraying the documentary text in the backdrop of a natural setting. For instance, the shots of freedom fighters (perhaps) coming back from a guerrilla operation – they were walking through a thick forest. The picture is mostly dark, with only a few rays of sunlight coming through the trees. The whole place feels quiet—not calm, but tense and heavy. This silence makes the moment feel serious and full of fear.

The documentary represented the freedom fighters as peace-loving, ordinary Bengali men who, at the same time, can resist and fight for the sake of liberty, and to safeguard their mother and motherland. The documentary narrated the freedom fighters as ‘daredevils with moral strength’ who, although not highly trained, are full of patriotic spirit, hence learning to fight quickly. Produced in the early phase of the Liberation War, this short-length documentary, even in a shorter segment, presents a powerful narrative of freedom fighters through vivid cinematic shots and thoughtful visual framing.

### **Analysis of Part Three: The Concluding Message**

*Stop Genocide* conveys its concluding message in the final 3 minutes 8 seconds (17:10 – 19:18) of its run time. In this segment, the documentary relates the genocides of Vietnam and Algeria to that in Bangladesh, aiming to disseminate the emotion that genocide, wherever and whenever it occurs, is a universal crime and should be stopped.

Through detailed narration, the documentary places Bangladesh’s Liberation War within the global struggle for democratic rights, referencing conflicts occurring in Paris and Spain, in Auschwitz and Bougainville, in Algeria and Palestine, in South Africa, Tonga and Haiti, and in Vietnam. *Stop Genocide* particularly draws resemblances between the genocide in Bangladesh and those in Vietnam and Palestine. While interrogating for a rape victim’s identity, the documentary leaves the answer to her arguing that it is pointless to look for her individual identity, because she represents one among millions of faces across the world who are the victims of the world’s aggressive politics of destroying others, or denying others’ democratic rights. Her pain and suffering are just repeated in a new place, to a different person.

In the final minute, the word “*Genocide*” echoes again and again, each repetition growing louder and more haunting, followed by the word “*Stop*”, also echoing—sharp, urgent, and insistent. The overlapping echoes make an emotional rhythm, turning the screen into a platform of protest and an urge to warn and wake up the international community. These chronicles are accompanied by the narrator's unrest appeal to stand for the Bangladeshi people’s rights and to stop killing innocent Bengalis. It says, “In the interest of international solidarity, freedom-loving people of the world must fight alongside the people of Bangladesh and do everything in their power to bring to an end this grisly campaign of genocide.”

### **Analysis of Findings Situating Within Theoretical Frameworks**

Examining the visual imagery through Hall’s constructive lens, this study finds that *Stop Genocide* offers layered visual narratives to construct meaning around nationalism, victimhood, and resistance. The constructive approach explains how meaning is not naturally embedded rather is imposed and produced through using representational practices. Thereby, this paper reveals familiar tropes and strategies deployed in the documentary that guide the audience to receive the film in a prescribed way.

The representational strategies were linear and familiar, branding the pain and suffering to the international community. The stereotypical portrayal of Bengali refugees as passive, vulnerable, and voiceless reinforces a monolithic image of victimhood, ignoring alternative possibilities. Their pain and suffering were highlighted, but their agency was minimised. Their agential power in resilience, survival strategies, or political consciousness was not acknowledged. Global media's role in creating a stereotyped image of a refugee is supported by several scholarly works. For instance, Wright (2002), Patterson (2001), and Zetter (1991) examined the representation of refugees across a range of media forms, i.e. media photography, documentary, and bureaucratic documents. They opined, visual representation confirms a pre-established pattern of refugee (Wright, 2002:54); it is not always balanced and objective rather visualised from a negative point of view (Patterson, 2001:151). Zetter (1991) claims that within the context of public policy practices, refugees are identified from an institutional point of view where the institutions, in turn, try to establish their legitimacy and apparent benevolence. In such a process, an individual refugee's case is replaced by a general refugee story based on a selective, materialist, but assumed need, i.e. food, shelter, and protection. This process of identification ignores an individual's needs as well as reinforces the stereotyped identity of refugees.

Representation of refugees as starving, diseased, and homeless has become a universal image (Rajaram, 2002). While reviewing several literatures on refugees, Rajaram asserts, "Refugees are 'universal victims': a historicizing generality that makes it difficult to understand that there are individual politics and histories behind the pictures of teeming masses of bodies" (Rajaram, 2002:252). He made it clear that such representation is actually a reproduction of Western ways of knowing. Without narrating the political context, without going through the histories, most of all by "obscuring the particularity of different sorts of refugee experience" (*Ibid*: 251), refugees become a speechless, biological corporeality. These pictorial representation helps to serve institutional interest, i.e. legitimacy of humanitarian activities through commodifying the refugee body/experience.

Similarly, the representation of the rape victim was stereotypical, and she was generalized, suggesting her pain parallels that of millions of others. While such a typical narrative may provoke global solidarity, it also risks erasing individual pain and suffering by oversimplifying the archetype of raped women's victimhood. These may be common features of refugees and rape victims, yet this is how the media reinforces existing images, denying the possibilities of variation. The media perform as complicit agents in imposing particular traits on specific identities, as they often do when representing ethnic, racial, or gender identities. Hall explains this system as an execution of power aligned with dominant social practices.

The freedom fighters, conversely, are constructed as morally motivated and peace-loving individuals who, due to their patriotism, become "daredevils." This too is a constructed identity that frames the freedom fighter as invariably positive, patriotic, and committed to fighting for the country. However, there are instances in Bangladesh's

history showing that not all freedom fighters were courageous or patriotic. Sometimes, as Nagel notes (Nagel, 2001), warriors joined the guerrilla force to avoid social disdain. Moreover, the documentary does not simply depict freedom fighters; it actively produces a meaning of Bengali resistance that is ethical, grounded, and collective. Hall describes this process of emphasizing certain identities while downplaying others, and the deliberate creation of meaning, as the politics of representation—an ongoing struggle intersecting with power. In Hall’s words, “this opens out into a ‘politics of representation,’ a struggle over meaning which continues and is unfinished” (Hall, 1997: 277). Even the final segment in the documentary creates a dramatic mood by using special effects through repeated echoed words “genocide” and “stop”. This dramatic deployment is a deliberate mechanism by the director to further reinforce this constructed meaning. By echoing the words “Genocide” and “Stop,” the film transforms language into a weapon of protest. The rhythmic echoes and rich sonic texture transform the screen into a powerful site of political concern, appealing to the global audiences to sympathise with the Bengali community and respond on a humanitarian ground. Through Hall’s lens, this representation is a strategic use of the documentary platform—not only to construct meaning but also to ensure the persistence and impact of the message through symbolic and affective strategies, rather than merely factual recounting. Foregrounding Clifford and Marcus’s (1986/2023) thesis about the politics of representation, this paper reveals how the representation of the Liberation War is shaped by its director Zahir Raihan’s positionality. Zahir Raihan’s socialist orientation becomes evident in his use of Western music with a title card containing a statement of Lenin (with Lenin’s sketch) on the screen from his book *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* (1913), meaning the right to self-determination should not be perceived as secession. This juxtaposition refers to Raihan’s ideological position on anti-imperialist solidarity and collective freedom, framing the right to self-determination as a revolutionary process rather than as secession. His authorial voice, therefore, goes beyond simple observation—it is shaped by his political consciousness, reflecting multiple subjectivities.

## Conclusion

This article analysed the first documentary film of Bangladesh, *Stop Genocide*, directed by prominent Bangladeshi filmmaker Zahir Raihan. Findings from this study suggest that while this historically acclaimed documentary helped to attract international communities' concern towards the genocide perpetrated by the Pakistan Army in 1971, critical point of view, it can be said that the documentary practised gendered, stereotyped representation strategies. For instance, refugees are represented as a large group that consists of an anonymous, heterogeneous body overlooking their individuality, hence identity, agency, opinions and their own histories. In this context, it can be argued that Zahir Raihan walked through the Western way of representation by visualising *Bengali* refugees as a mass body, needy and vulnerable. Similarly, raped women are stereotypically visualized as devastated, shocked and in an absolute passive mode. Further, although a detailed description of rape was given as an attempt to convey

the audience about how sturdy and aggressive the perpetrator was, and how cruel the enemy soldiers were, the narration also can be taken as a sensational description of rape that eroticize the event. Therefore, despite being a witness to the Liberation War of Bangladesh, gendered stereotyped representation has been marked in *Stop Genocide*, which in turn recycles the gendered national war discourse. Finally, *Stop Genocide* functions as an intersection between propaganda, advocacy, and historical documentation. By examining the film's production, sponsorship, and reception, this study contributes to broader discourses on war cinema, media representation, and political filmmaking. Investigating how the director balanced factual reporting with ideological alignment has provided an insight into the role of filmmaking in shaping nationalist narratives.

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