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Feminism and its ‘other’: representing the ‘new woman’ of Bangladesh

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This essay examines women’s oppression and organizing against gender violence in contemporary Bangladesh through the lens of television. I argue that the telefilm Ayna (The Mirror, 2006), written and directed by popular film actor and women’s rights activist Kabari Sarwar, offers a window into the changing social and economic landscape of contemporary Bangladesh and the complex negotiations of power and inequality across gender, class and community. Furthermore, it offers an opportunity to unpack the social messages underlying development and modernization initiatives, the new kinds of alliances as well as dependencies engendered by them, and their multiple and uneven consequences. An investigation of the representations of competing and contradictory notions of women’s subjectivity and agency in this telefilm allows us to understand how these intersect with shifting notions of local/global patriarchies, feminist solidarity and women’s empowerment in Bangladesh today. Further, this essay illuminates the disjunctures between representations of the ‘new woman’ circulated through development and certain feminist advocacy narratives with women’s lived realities of oppression, and survival.

Keywords: development discourse; modernity; feminism; new woman; patriarchy; Bangladesh

Introduction

The current moment in contemporary Bangladesh is witnessing a shift in the representations of ideal womanhood away from earlier anti-colonialist and nationalist era models when the middle class woman was considered the epitome of spirituality, domesticity and the essentially non-Western core of an authentic Indian culture (Chatterjee 1989, 240–43). This essay explores and analyses constructions of the ‘new woman’ in Bangladesh, but does so alongside notions of feminist solidarity and women’s organizing against gender violence. In particular, I look at television representations of the ‘new woman’ in the post-colonial woman-oriented narrative of the telefilm Ayna (The Mirror, 2006) in order to engage an analysis of the socio-cultural issues it dramatizes, specifically the changing notions of gender oppression within a transitioning society. My analysis will take on the concomitant new subject positions required for women as well as modes of feminist mobilization and activism constituted in this human rights advocacy film. It is my intention to engage a textual analysis of Ayna as a way to launch a discussion of the socio-cultural issues it dramatizes. In so doing, I am aware that not all audiences who view this telefilm will share my reading of its content and intent; nevertheless, I believe such an examination of the education-entertainment transmitted by the visual mass-media provides valuable insights into the transnational politics of development and feminist advocacy.

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Reading and watching the ‘new woman’

The social construction of the identity of the ‘new woman’ in colonial and post-colonial Bengal has been the subject of feminist theorizing for some time. Chatterjee (1989) has noted that the ideal woman in the nationalist context was constructed as elite, in stark contrast to both the uneducated, downtrodden and backward women of South Asia’s poorer classes and her sexually liberated, modern and amoral Western counterparts. A variation of the Victorian new woman of England, the ideal nationalist woman’s counterpart in colonial and post-colonial Bengal and post-independent Bangladesh has had diverse applicability across the domains of class and rural–urban divide. Amin (1994, 137–40) refers to the new woman in the context of Bengal as ‘layered’, ‘a composite of many women’ and ‘elusive’. Discontinuous from the colonial rescue narratives and anti-colonial and nationalist representations of the normative middle class respectable woman (bhadromohila), contemporary constructions of the new woman are shaped by discourses of development and modernization. Utilizing narratives of ‘women’s uplift’ and emancipation as the benchmark of progress, native/local women are put in the contradictory positions of both the victim and the savior. These competing constructions of the new woman serve larger progress narratives of both the nation and Western-global feminism. They replicate the victim–savior trope of colonial feminism by assigning agency to the emancipated local woman (as the human rights activist) while simultaneously representing local women as merely the beneficiaries of modernization schemes.

The invention of ‘third world women’ as a category to be ‘intervened’ upon and ‘empowered’ by Western experts and technological interventions through global development discourse and practice (Escobar 1995) has influenced both governmental and non-governmental development initiatives in countries of the global South including Bangladesh. Women’s issues in contemporary Bangladesh are linked to and shaped by the linear progress narratives of development and global feminism. In these narratives poor women oppressed by local patriarchal religious and cultural practices are uplifted by their integration into global capitalist development initiatives like the garments industry or NGOs. These two sectors, one with an explicitly economic and the other a social mission, have been facilitated by global restructuring. Together they have revolutionized women’s participation in the labor force and women’s emergence into public spaces as economic agents (Feldman 2001). At the same time, the NGO boom has benefited the middle class by facilitating the creation of a local cadre of development professionals and staff in the service of ‘uplifting’ and ‘empowering’ the poor. This new professional class is perceived as enlightened, highly educated, urban and liberated. Including both men and women, this new class works within the liberal-nationalist mission of the nation-state and the liberal-humanitarian mission of NGO-led development initiatives. The relationship between these actors – the local agents of social change and the ‘beneficiaries’ of development – constitutes a new type of dependency. Modes of women’s organizing are shaped by this dependency, creating competing identities of feminists and other women.

Ayna, a woman-oriented telefilm that aired multiple times in prime time on the private channel NTV Bangladesh, animates a discussion of human rights advocacy. The use of video can be effective in presenting complex social realities by invoking empathy and creating an ethical community. Narrative strategies are used to make ‘the message’ palatable for a wide audience. Ayna is certainly not alone in the genre of woman-oriented films with a social message but the fact that it was written and directed by Kabari Sarwar, a prominent activist and film star who reigned over the silver screen for three decades, gives it a wider appeal. In an interview with New Age newspaper, Sarwar said, ‘I opt for such
kind of scripts, because there are lots of similar incidents happening in our society on a regular basis. I would like to make people aware through cinema’ (10 March 2005). The feature film is currently available nationally on DVD produced by Impress Telefilm, a leading media production house in Bangladesh, and has been widely disseminated by G-Series, a private enterprise that markets popular film and music.

Ayna can be read as a text that reveals the ways in which dominant scripts of globalization, gender oppression and women’s emancipation are both reinscribed and subverted. In her essay ‘Global Feminisms and the State of Feminist Film Theory’, E. Ann Kaplan (2004) traces the shift in feminist film critique in the early 1970s that moved away from prioritizing issues of the gaze, psychoanalysis and sexual difference between men and women to an emphasis on cultural differences between women racialized by historical discourses, traditions and power relations (Kaplan 2004, 1242). Ayna acts as a script that translates the shifting socio-economic trends in contemporary Bangladesh into a social text, thereby generating dialogue and knowledge through a ‘palatable’ message for mass viewership. The 2006 World Development Indicators suggest 29% of households in Bangladesh own a television set. Anthropologist Cymene Howe (2008) calls the transmission of social messages through television ‘televisionary’ whereby education-entertainment impacts on shifting cultural values as opposed to more traditional, non-media forms of advocacy geared towards policy change. A recent study conducted by Do and Kincaid (2006) found the impact of entertainment-education television drama on health knowledge to be generating knowledge and dialogue among the viewers on issues such as the transmission and prevention of HIV/AIDS in Bangladesh. Making use of the dramatic format, messages are inserted at appropriate moments and desirable health behavior is modeled through the characters. The authors claim, ‘Social modeling allows the audience to experience vicarious motivation, observation of consequences of the modeled behavior, vicarious reinforcement, and parasocial interaction when the audience becomes emotionally involved with characters in a drama’ (Do and Kincaid 2006, 304). In this type of film, key ideas are integrated into the plot with the assumption these will trigger interpersonal communication, especially among friends and within families.

A series of essays in the American Anthropologist (2006) on the visual culture of human rights raises critical questions on NGO-generated human rights discourse and practice in the global South, the cinematic representations of human rights (advocacy and suffering), and the engendering of solidarity and action through media. Meg McLagan (2006) notes that the proliferation of organizations and venues producing and disseminating rights-oriented media facilitates connections between filmmakers and members of grassroots, nongovernmental, nonprofit and governmental communities. She draws attention to the social processes through which human rights media are produced and circulated by compelling readers to question the political and social backdrop of the critical generation of human rights visual culture as well as modes of mobilization encouraged by such media. Speaking on the power of visual media as tools for activists, Leshu Torchin (2006, 214) posits, ‘Film can visualize abject conditions or humanitarian mission work for a broad audience while stories and images marshal the sentiment of vast and dispersed spectators to generate empathy, encourage action, and, . . . raise money for political and relief efforts.’ Sam Gregory (2006) expands on this point by noting that human rights advocacy film tends to utilize two main discourses: legal (including national and international human rights laws) and transnational (including both transnational empathy and solidarity). These discourses privilege policy advocacy and generate support for human rights by placing issues in what he terms the ‘global morality market’.
among multiple actors: funders, international NGOs, the state and the multiply located audiences in the local–global nexus.

The growth of social media as a field within the larger development agenda has created venues for transmitting messages with regard to social uplift and nation building (Abu-Lughod 2005). Writing about images of women in the media in post-colonial South Asia, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993) has commented that women figure primarily as either victims of social injustice and violence or confronters of social injustice; thus, ‘their relationship to the social structure is marked as external and adversarial rather than as integral and ambivalent’ (Rajan 1993, 138). And an exploration of the representations of multiple womanhood in *Ayna* allows us to understand how these intersect with larger pervasive social and economic structures like globalization, neoliberal development and NGO-ization that form the backdrop of transnational human rights advocacy films. By centering native/local women as agents, custodians of nation and culture, and moral guardians, texts such as *Ayna* avoid some of the earlier traps of West/non-West colonialist works while simultaneously replicating aspects of the colonial relationship within a local context with new actors. The film uses the dominant structure of human rights advocacy (scripted in global feminism, and discourses of liberal nationalism and neoliberal development) to represent gender oppression while attempting to mediate feminist consciousness and solidarity with popular appeal. This results in an inevitably ambivalent narrative about female subject construction. Seen in conjunction with ethnographic research, the limits and possibilities of such media representations of new women and the disjunctures with women’s lived realities of oppression and survival can be further explored.

**Ayna: a synopsis**

The telefilm *Ayna* offers a window into the changing social and economic landscape of contemporary Bangladesh and the complex negotiations of power and inequality across gender, class and community. It offers an opportunity to unpack the social messages underlying development and modernization initiatives, the new kinds of alliances and dependencies engendered by them, and their multiple and uneven consequences. The film also centrally features categorical representations of the ‘new woman’ as both the ‘development expert’ or patron/matron of development and the ‘aid recipient’ or client of development. *Ayna* can be read as a vehicle for transmitting educational messages about social ills and as a venue for eliciting political participation by envisioning models for individual and collective social action against injustice.

*Ayna* is about a young woman, Kushum, and the many trials she overcomes with regard to family, community, economic hardship, love and romance, and gender violence. The daughter of a folk singer, Kushum is a beautiful and spirited young woman with a strong penchant for speaking the truth. At the wedding of her friend, Tulı, she catches the eye of the local *mastaan* (individuals ranging from godfather types to local hoodlums with ties to the criminal underworld) Rameez when she confronts the bridegroom’s father about demanding a dowry and casting aspersions on the bride for her dark complexion. Rameez is unemployed and directionless, spending his time doing drugs, intimidating innocent villagers and visiting sex workers. When Kushum’s father rejects him as a suitor for his beloved daughter, Rameez murders him and then tries to rape Kushum. She manages to fight him off and runs away to Dhaka and finds employment as a domestic worker in a middle-class home. There, she is faced with sexual harassment by the male head of the household and is asked to leave by his wife. Desperate and without any knowledge of the
city, Kushum meets a group of young women who work in a garment factory. Eventually, she gets a job on the shop floor and falls in love with Dolon, a bachelor who lives in the same slum community as she does, and is an administrative officer in the same factory. As Kushum seems poised to marry Dolon, Rameez reappears in her life and casts a shadow of doubt on her character by claiming that he is her estranged husband.

Ukeel Apa, the second heroine of the film, is a human rights activist/feminist/lawyer consulted by Kushum. Ukeel Apa gives legal advice to the slum community and escorts Kushum to the police station to report a case against Rameez. Unable to circumvent the law, Rameez takes his revenge on Kushum by throwing acid at her on the night of her wedding to Dolon. The slum-factory community stands by Kushum and her new husband and helps to raise funds for her reconstructive surgery abroad. The arrangements are made by Ukeel Apa, who also raises private funds and seeks the help of NGOs. She also represents Kushum in court and wins the case against Rameez who is sentenced to death by hanging (in Bangladesh, acid attacks resulting in severe injuries are punishable by death). A restored Kushum returns to her husband and her country after reconstructive surgery abroad.

Gender and class in Ayna

The social context in which Ayna is set reflects a complex set of issues including the gradual transition from agrarian to industrialized economy, urbanization and the flows of capital, ideas and people across local and global boundaries. In Power to Choose (2000), Naila Kabeer traces the transition from an agricultural economy to a monetized one in Bangladesh leading to an erosion of the ‘patriarchal contract’, the devaluation of women, the consolidation of the dowry and the emergence of new patriarchal alliances. Her research documents the impact of structural adjustment programs driven by Western donors and neoliberal development which has led to massive rural to urban migration and the growth of export processing zones in Bangladesh. She demystifies the category ‘garment girls’ popularly used to describe the surge in women’s participation in the labor force (particularly by young women) and their subsequent visibility in public spaces. Kabeer emphasizes that women enter these newly created occupations from diverse constituencies and under very different socio-economic circumstances. In Ayna, Kabari Sarwar grapples with some of these changes in Bangladeshi society across gender, class and community-based cleavages.

The newly emergent monetized relations are reflected in a scene from Ayna where Kushum’s friend Tuli’s marriage negotiations go awry because of her father’s inability to provide a color television as part of her dowry settlement:

Tuli’s father: I haven’t been able to arrange for the cash for a color TV yet.
Father of the bridegroom: This union (marriage) cannot be forged on credit.
Kushum’s father: I request you to honor his word. Please give him time to fulfill his promise of providing the color TV.
Father of bridegroom: My son’s marriage cannot be arranged on credit. This is a matter of honor. I will not be able to show my face to my community if the dowry settlement does not include a color TV.

In this conversation, we witness the changes in the community as it transitions into a capitalist economy. Terms of negotiation are shifting to where one’s word or promise can no longer take the place of cash or goods. Notions of honor are now tied to commodities like a color TV and the promise of future compensation, and trusting another’s word
cannot take the place of material goods. In earlier marriage practices in pre-industrial South Asia the bride and her family were compensated for the loss of her labor. Newer dowry practices favor the groom’s family, intensifying a woman’s status as a ‘liability’ to her family. This transition is exemplified in the conversation that ensues between Azam Ali (Kushum’s father) and his daughter following the above-mentioned scene.

_Azam Ali_: Tuli’s father was able to marry her off. Given my financial situation, I doubt that I can do the same for you.

_Kushum_: Why do you have to marry me off? Am I a burden to you?

_Azam Ali_: I am not suggesting that daughters are burdens to their families. However, it is my duty to arrange your marriage. I cannot do it however if the demands are as exorbitant as in the case of Tuli.

_Kushum_: Why would they be? I am neither dark nor disabled. I am very good at managing the household (_shongshaarer kaaj_). If my prospective in-laws demand dowry, beat them off with shoes (_joota diye pitay diba_). I will not enter into a marriage with dowry.

_Azam Ali_: You are still a child. You don’t understand the harsh ways of the world.

Because Kushum is fair complexioned (unlike Tuli) she has a better chance of negotiating a smaller dowry for her family. She confesses to her friend Karimon, a young woman of Kushum’s age, that she wants to be swept away by love and marry a man who will always stand by her. She is not pleased to be marrying Rameez, whose proposal her father finally accepts believing that he can be disciplined through marriage to Kushum. Rameez used to work in a garment factory in Dhaka but found himself confined by its routine. Instead he makes his living by demanding ‘fees’ from local vendors who hand money over to him out of fear. Karimon explains to Kushum that she would be doing well by marrying Rameez: ‘Women are fields for men to plough. It doesn’t matter which man ploughs the field because women are only recognized for how good a harvest they are able to produce.’ Kushum however is not satisfied with her friend’s advice and continues to be doubtful about marrying Rameez. Kushum’s father’s cautionary words regarding her innocence about the harsh world come back to haunt her when, after Rameez murders her father, she flees to Dhaka city, a world vastly different from her ‘simpler’ existence in the village.

In Dhaka, Kushum finds work as a maid in a middle class household where, surrounded by concrete and modern amenities she spends her days pining for the life she left behind in the village. Although her female employer, a housewife, treats her with kindness, Kushum has to fend off the sexual overtures of her male employer. Admitting her own vulnerability, Kushum’s female employer compensates her with cash and urges her to find alternative employment. Her parting comment is, ‘I wanted to help you but I am just as helpless as you are.’ Despite her economic and educational privileges, this woman is nevertheless shown to be constrained by her gender and finds commonality with Kushum. Ironically, because Kushum is fired, and despite her resulting economic vulnerability, she is able to exit the ‘patriarchal contract’ whereas her middle class ‘sister’ cannot. Kushum, having escaped from the _shamaj_ (moral economy) of the village is freer to transgress patriarchal boundaries in the city, where she is relatively anonymous. It is her middle class counterpart who remains confined within the patriarchal norms of her community. Her home is her site of oppression and we see her only within the walls of her concrete apartment in the city. On the other hand, later in the film we see Kushum and Dolon enjoying the freedom, mobility and anonymity of the city as they begin to fall in love and patronize public parks and restaurants. Kumkum Sangari (1993) has argued that patriarchy is class differentiated, and some women participate and reproduce patriarchal relations in consent and in contract. Kushum’s female employer overlooks her husband’s transgression in marriage as her
marriage presumably offers her security. She sustains the patriarchal contract and her position within it by staying in the marriage yet offering only a token compensation to Kushum. The potential of female solidarity here is bypassed in favor of individual gain, economic security, and middle class gender norms of respectability.

After losing her job, Kushum, lost and desperate on the streets of Dhaka, is given shelter by a slum community, many of whose inhabitants work in a garment factory nearby. Although the factory is a source of jobs for mostly young women, entry into its gated walls and survival on its tiered shop floors are fiercely negotiated. Floor supervisor Khalek must be compensated handsomely by any candidate before they secure a position in the factory. Women workers in the factory must often do ‘double duty’ by moonlighting as sex workers in order to keep their jobs and provide for their families. When a worker leaves her job in order to get married, Kushum is lucky to bypass Khalek and land a job in the factory through the help of Dolon, an administrative officer there. Women in this complex nexus of urban slum-factory relationships are referred to as *maal* (property or subject of). The way Kushum gets her job cause a rift between Khalek and Dolon, because the former feels side-stepped in the chain of command as he was not consulted and did not benefit from Kushum’s employment. The job, however, fans the flame of romance between Kushum and Dolon. A grateful Kushum hands over her first month’s salary to Fatima and her new ‘family’ who gave her shelter in their room in the slum. The following conversation unfolds when Kushum earns her first month’s salary:

*Dulabhai* (term used for elder sister’s husband, in this case Fatima’s husband): Why are you handing us your entire salary? You should save some for your future. Without cash, you won’t be able to get married.

*Kushum*: I am not interested in buying a husband. It is your responsibility now to find a self-respecting man for your new sister-in-law.

*Dulabhai* (to Fatima): Keep some money aside for rent and food and give the rest back to Kushum. I will help her to open a bank account with it.

On the one hand, the garment factory symbolizes a place of economic and sexual exploitation. On the other, new fictive kinship structures emerge among women, and between men and women, reflecting the fluidity and multiplicities of power structures. Consequently, Shelley Feldman (2001) has argued for a more nuanced understanding of the emergence of the category ‘female garment worker’ in the context of a modernizing economy in Bangladesh. Feldman’s work on globalization and women’s labor in Bangladesh helps reveal the unexpected ways patriarchies are reconstituting at the intersections of globalization and economic restructuring as demonstrated in the above vignette from the film. She argues that globalization is constituted through complex and contradictory histories and trajectories of women’s lives and not simply in response to external realities such as international donor and state-driven Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). Women are actors and determine the way globalization is enacted rather than being simply acted upon by its economic flows. On the shop floor, women are the subject (*maal*) of multiple negotiations. In the film, the factory is built on their labor but the women are vulnerable to transactions by Khalek the pimp, who profits from their economic insecurity. However, the women shape the informal economy through their triple duty of working on the shop floor, moonlighting, and sustaining the newly emerging kin and community structures in the slum. Kushum addressing Fatima’s husband as *dulabhai* (elder sister’s husband), and the landlord as *nana* (grandfather), illustrates the forging of kinship like community structures among people who are associated not by blood but by processes of social and economic restructuring. This potentially wards off
sexual tension between men and women who are not presumably protected by familial relations.

These fictive kinship associations of the slum community thrive on women’s labor. *Nana* (the elderly landlord affectionately addressed as grandfather by the women workers) invests in a color TV with the rent he collects monthly from the workers. This in turn acts as a source of attraction for the entire community, bringing them together as the women gather around the television in *nana*’s quarters. After returning from the factory, Fatima, Kushum and other young women pool their resources and cook together. Dolon begins to pay them to provide him with his meals. While patriarchal divisions of labor are not entirely subverted, new kinds of kin arrangements and newer gendering patterns of urban space are forged. The film portrays the changing meanings of kin and community as number D-26 in the factory (Kushum’s numerical designation) negotiates the city, the shop floor and relations in the slum community.

**Feminism, community and solidarity**

The young, beautiful and spirited Kushum is undoubtedly the heroine of *Ayna*. The story revolves around her struggles in overcoming oppressive social structures within the family, community and wage labor while finding enduring love. Her subject position as the woman aspiring to better conditions and the ‘benefits’ of modernization poses a stark contrast with Afroza (addressed as Ukeel Apa, the human rights lawyer, activist and feminist) who helps Kushum realize her dreams. Forces of modernity enable the contradictory yet necessary co-existence of two heroines, two sides of the contemporary ‘new woman’.

The creation of such newer subject positions as evidenced in *Ayna* is linked to the proliferation of liberal apparatuses of human rights and neoliberalism. Lauren Leve (2007, 97) argues that the post-Cold War era is marked by a certain global cultural imaginary recognizable in a ‘constellation of institutions, ideologies, frameworks, structures, forms of knowledge and norms, that acts in such a way as to establish not only the categories of democratic social identities, but the very ontology that underlies these identifications itself’. Neoliberal economic development, along with liberal political structures including human rights discourse and practice, are the venues through which this identity machine thrives and creates new kinds of subjects that are both legible and governable through these liberal structures. In this film, the subject positions of the human rights lawyer and the feminist activist, as well as the beneficiaries of human rights, are legible and governable through the same liberal apparatuses. Ukeel Apa, the human rights lawyer, NGO leader, feminist activist, represents a kind of global, cosmopolitan subject who can traverse multiple locales with ease and authority. She is shown advocating for a woman victimized by *fatwa*¹ in a village and doing research about gender violence in urban slum communities. She is also a NGO activist who raises funds for Kushum’s rehabilitation abroad, a powerful lawyer arguing Kushum’s case in court and an outspoken feminist who speaks eloquently to journalists about the global oppression of women. On the flipside of her activism is the subject of her advocacy – the victimized rural woman, the oppressed slum woman, the violated heroine – all in need of her intervention. It is on the backs of the subjects for whom she tirelessly advocates that Ukeel Apa’s own subjectivity is dependent. These contradictory subject positions are constituted through the liberal apparatus of the human rights identity machine that sets up the agent and client in categorical ways, thus perpetuating itself by legitimizing certain kinds of relationships, and governing structures, such as neoliberalism, global feminism and nationalism.
In post-independent Bangladesh the woman’s question has been framed within discourses of modernity, development and globalization. Poor women have entered this equation primarily as clients of state, private and non-profit sectors. The specific consequences for women as the result of the growth of the NGO sector and the proliferation of neoliberal development programs in the context of a weak state and the imperatives of Western financial institutions have been widely discussed (Hashmi 2000; Kabeer 2000; Karim 2004; Shehabuddin 1999). Lamia Karim has persuasively argued that in contemporary Bangladesh the urban-based elite women’s movement (the patrons, or more appropriately ‘matrons’) is worlds apart from their rural counterparts who lack both access and resources and are caught in the competitive vying for clients among multiple constituencies such as the state, NGOs (whether feminist or not) and the rural elites. NGOs, argue Siddiqi (2006) and Feldman (2001), have taken on the role of the moral regulator and patron along with and at times in place of older forms of power structures like elite constellations of men.

A neo-patriarchal relationship seems to have emerged through NGOs and between their patrons and clients. This relationship is exemplified through Ukeel Apa and the slum community, particularly Kushum, but also to a lesser extent men like Dolon and Rameez. Anne Marie Goetz’s (2001) study of ‘women development workers’ points to the emergence of a new category of women seemingly morally bolstered by the rhetoric of development that promises to lift the poor, particularly women, out of their backward and uneducated ways. Ukeel Apa in Ayna must be understood in such a context: she is the enlightened, educated and empowered NGO activist with access to resources and the voice of morality. The space between her and Kushum, the subject of development initiatives, is ultimately incommensurable because the former’s subject position of patron relies on the latter’s abject victimization.

The introduction and integration of ‘Women in Development’ (WID) followed by ‘Gender and Development’ (GAD) and gender mainstreaming strategies in global development rhetoric and practice has created opportunities not only for poor women to be integrated into neoliberal development projects but has also led to employment opportunities for urban-based highly educated middle class women as NGO professionals. Ironically, however, Goetz (2001) notes that the bureaucratization of NGOs and professionalization of development has led to the replacement of local women staff with ‘efficient’, ‘skilled’, and ‘trained’ staff consisting mostly of men but also of women from urban spaces outside the community. The degree to which these programs actually practice gender conscientization and ‘empowerment’, however, is the subject of much scholarly controversy. Goetz (2001) cites a study conducted by the Bangladesh Integrated Rural Development Program to suggest that few of these development professionals are motivated by feminist goals of social transformation. Moreover, these women were uncritical of the patriarchal aspects of their own culture and often expressed ‘patronizing and dismissive’ views regarding poor rural women, the very same group that they are in the business of ‘serving’. It is nevertheless important to note that these women development professionals were transgressing social norms and entering traditionally male spaces through what Goetz explains, using the words of Simmons et al., is ‘a strategy of accommodation and reform rather than of confrontation and radical change’ (Goetz 2001, 109).

Also relevant to this discussion is a study conducted by Aditi Mitra and Jean Van Delinder (2007) on elite women’s work in NGOs in Kolkata. Based on ethnographic research in women’s NGOs, including in-depth interviews, the authors argue that elite women NGO workers perceive themselves as empowering ‘other’ less fortunate women. The interviews also reveal that the process of empowering others is one and the same as empowering the self. The authors see the role of elite women in NGOs as ‘an extension
of and reinforce[ing] their existing status, social class norms, education, upbringing, family values and social networks’ (Mitra and Delinder 2007, 355). Additionally, the authors argue that, ‘in the age of transnational feminisms, the way these women define feminism and construct the image of a feminist based on their appeal to feminist ideas helps to analyze the discourse of feminism in the post-colonial context’ (2007, 358). Although Women in Development and Gender and Development perspectives have argued that women of all social classes are subordinate to men of their social classes, these same discourses have not adequately analyzed the power of women of certain social classes over others. In the age of transnational feminisms, neo-patriarchal relations among differently located women can reflect a consensual and contractual structure much like the ones between men and women. These hierarchical and co-dependent relations among women, exemplified by the two sides of the new woman in Ayna begs critical interrogation of feminism, community and solidarity by, about, and for women. It raises the question, ‘what does feminist solidarity look like, and whom does it benefit?’

Below I quote a few of the responses of the women in Mitra and Delinder’s (2007) study:

Family thinks this kind of work does not bring in any kinds of rewards – monetary or any kind. Initially, my in-laws were not at all approving but now ... when I was always being quoted in the newspapers and was being interviewed and all that, then they started saying ‘oh, we are so proud of our daughter-in-law!!’ (Mitra and Delinder 2007, 369)

You know, let us face it in the present society around the world if you don’t earn too much, then your work is not seen as important. In my family, everybody is earning in five figures. Because of this (low) earning possibly, there is little contempt I can feel, although people don’t tell me. But also they think that I am doing important, at least somewhat they accept and my daughters also think that this work is important. [But] there is a plus point of this work; where I work there my work is very much appreciated. As I said, starting at such an old age, I found it difficult to be accepted in other places, including one women’s NGO, but here I have been very well accepted. The girls I work with I feel they love me, they love me ... and that is a very great thing. (Mitra and Delinder 2007, 371–2)

This is my life. If one gives me the choice ... it gives my life some meaning. (Mitra and Delinder 2007, 373)

It is clear from these statements that elite women working in NGOs feel validated through their work on behalf of other women. The position of social privilege that these women possess can lead them to unwittingly exert social control over those groups they strive to empower. This is not to suggest that the goals of the women are somehow contrary to feminist goals, nor that there is anything wrong in finding value and meaning in the work that one does. These narratives, however, often obfuscate power relations within transnational women’s networks that unwittingly reproduce the patron–client dyad. Here poor women are perceived as objects of intervention rather than as agents in their own right. The dependent relationships between elite and non-elite women are framed primarily through self-validating moral terms of ‘doing important work’ as opposed to a critical transformative angle. These power relations can perpetuate social inequality and gender oppression between women as well as women and men of different classes. In Ayna Ukeel Apa acts as the feminist counter-heroine to Kushum. The film opens with a shot of her walking through rural Bangladesh accompanied by a local woman NGO staff member who carries her water bottle for her, and helps her climb into a boat to travel to a nearby village where they are investigating a fatwa-related attack against a woman. Ukeel Apa makes her second appearance when the setting of the film shifts to Dhaka and Kushum arrives in the bustling metropolis. Ukeel Apa is seated in her living room where a journalist
is interviewing her on the status of women and children in the world. She pontificates earnestly:

_Ukeel Apa:_ Many works of fiction prose and poetry have been written worldwide on the situation of women in patriarchal societies. I remember reading about a Vietnamese folk song that compares the fate of women to rain. Like drops of rain, women may land in a palace or a ditch. We talk about progress and civilization but all that is empty rhetoric. In reality, the majority of women in the world are in vulnerable situations.

_Journalist:_ As a human rights advocate could you say something about the situation of children?

_Ukeel Apa:_ In our country, the lion’s share of children are deprived of their basic rights. Societal inequality, poverty, superstition, illiteracy, ignorance, etc. are responsible for the dismal situation of children. This is a big challenge for our political leaders.

This and a number of scenes described below serve to introduce Ukeel Apa as an influential member of the urban, progressive, activist community. At times she is shown in her own element in an urban modern apartment, in others navigating villages and slums for her advocacy and research projects. In her third appearance in the film Ukeel Apa is seen among the slum community where Kushum finds shelter. She and her assistant, another female NGO staff member, are conducting a research study in a number of Dhaka slums on various ways that working women are victims of abuse. It is clear that she has respect and authority among the community, the members of which look up to her as someone who has the means to provide justice, particularly to women in vulnerable situations. She makes her fourth heroic appearance precisely at the moment when Rameez has come to abduct Kushum under the pretense that he is her lawfully married husband, casting doubt on her virtue and character among the community members who are getting ready to arrange Kushum’s wedding to Dolon. Rameez claims that Kushum ran away from him because of a minor domestic dispute and that he is now trying to make amends and take her home. In this scene, the arrival of Ukeel Apa in her shiny new car symbolizes the power she wields as a NGO professional. NGOs are often criticized by the public in contemporary Bangladesh as running businesses rather than welfare-oriented work and for using donor funds in order to acquire material objects like fancy cars and computers rather than serving their constituencies. She placates a hysterical Kushum, who falls at Ukeel Apa’s feet, by asking her to ‘calm down’. Her intervention is framed as neutral and fair and through the objective arm of the law. She asks Rameez for proof of his marriage to Kushum and she demands from Kushum proof that he (Rameez) indeed is her father’s killer. As both parties are unable to provide proof, she takes them with her to the police station to open a case file.

When Rameez fails to provide proof of his marriage to Kushum, Ukeel Apa urges the slum community to go ahead with the wedding preparations for Kushum and Dolon. With much fanfare and jubilation the two are reunited. The camaraderie in this community brought together by the factory is depicted in the following song:

We don’t have gold bangles, we don’t have famous friends  
We don’t own homes, cars, or wealth  
We work in the factory and live in this slum  
Our only asset is the love in our hearts  
We don’t have the means to fulfill our many desires  
But we can enjoy the beauty of the full moon  
Our friend has married a beauty  
We wish them a happy life together  
Our dreams may not be fulfilled  
But we find peace with the one we love
This song is representative of the class divide between the slum community and the elite. It presents a different kind of support network not so centrally emphasized in the film. *Ayna* shows divergent notions of feminist and community solidarity. Sangari (1993) asserts that the ‘consent’ of women to patriarchy across different classes is nuanced differently contingent on the specific situation of their social subordination. The solidarity between Ukeel Apa and Kushum is shaped by the latter’s consent to the contractual relationship offered by the former: that is, access to formal institutions of power such as the legal system and the NGO community. The terms of this relationship, however, are facilitated by Ukeel Apa. In this film, neoliberal establishments like NGOs and the state become the saviors of the poor and the victimized and offer the kinds of support legible and governable through those apparatuses. Other kinds of support provided by the community – love, emotional solidarity, even financial support – are represented as secondary. The horizontal reciprocity and informal systems of support practiced within the slum community are not intelligible through the politics of neoliberalism or the kind of feminism depicted in the film. It is the community that sustains Kushum by giving her shelter, a job and ultimately love. She in turn provides for the community by cooking and caring for the children. Ukeel Apa on the other hand can extend a helping hand through moral and legal directives.

Ukeel Apa fits the category of the woman development professional; by empowering Kushum she also empowers herself. Furthermore, she and Kushum represents two sides of the new woman in contemporary Bangladesh – one the urban, educated patron of development and the other the rural, simple recipient of development. It is curious however that while Kushum’s female subject position is formed in relation to her family and community, the film constructs Ukeel Apa without either. Additionally, her sexuality does not appear to be of much significance in the plot whereas Kushum is repeatedly (by Dolon and by the young women factory workers) cautioned against the ‘dangers’ lurking around every corner for young women in the city. By contrast, Ukeel Apa does not face similar gender vulnerability while traversing multiple urban and rural sites. At home in the city, she is shown alternately with a male journalist interviewing her and a male assistant bringing her a report on trafficking in women. In one shot she is seen in bed alone with her papers and reports. Her class and educational privileges allow her to transcend her gender vulnerability. As a powerful woman, she has male subordinates as well as female. Her only friend in the film is a young male artist who donates the money from the sale of his art to Kushum’s cause.

Purnima Mankekar (1999), in her analysis of women-oriented narratives in post-colonial Indian television, suggests that the figure of the emancipated woman represents progress where her service to the nation supersedes that to the family. At the same time, the ‘uplift’ of women is seen to be a nationalist project in taking the nation forward into the twenty-first century. The socially conscious, strong willed and loyal modern woman is the custodian of morality and integrity of the nation. In this representation, Mankekar claims the ‘woman’s question’ in the post-colonial context is subsumed within a liberal nationalist and, I would add, sometimes liberal feminist, framework that is not oppositional but reformist. The feminist human rights advocate in *Ayna* is in a lone struggle to serve the nation, devoid of family, kin and community whereas Kushum’s subject position is intimately influenced by them. Ukeel Apa is a provider and arbiter of justice representing NGOs and the state. Thus the message of the film is made more ‘palatable’ as it does not unilaterally reject femininity or women’s position and roles within the community.
Victimization and agency

A feminist consciousness around oppression and resistance is evident throughout Ayna. Kushum vocally complains about the ills of dowry and the obligations placed on women through marriage. Ukeel Apa conducts research about gender violence and advocates for women victims. The slum community expresses a class-based consciousness in the song discussed previously and through their modes of mobilizing on behalf of Kushum. Yet these modes of resistance are couched within the dominant discourse of neoliberalism where Ukeel Apa, as the symbol of a transnational identity machine, represents justice through law and NGO-driven organizing rather than personal empowerment. Resistance in the film thus is trapped within dominant ideologies, namely, globalization, neoliberalism and patriarchies.

Following the horrific acid attack on Kushum on the night of her wedding to Dolon, the slum community rushes her to Dhaka Medical College Hospital and makes a single call to Ukeel Apa for help. She meets Dolon and others at the hospital where the doctor tells them reassuringly, ‘The patient is in our care and we will do everything to make her well.’ Ukeel Apa presides over a gathering at the slum with the police where she tells them, ‘The incident has been covered by the press. The entire country knows about it. You must not let the culprits get away . . .’ The community becomes agitated and starts shouting at the police when they are placated by Ukeel Apa, ‘That’s enough. Am I not by your side?’ Thus, rather than allowing the community to take care of their own, Ukeel Apa remains in control of the situation.

Later Ukeel Apa also takes charge of fixing Kushum’s acid ruined face. After a desperate Kushum tries to commit suicide by throwing herself in front of a speeding train and is saved by Dolon in the nick of time, she cries to Ukeel Apa, ‘What is the use of my staying alive?’ Ukeel Apa reprimands her, ‘Your life has not become meaningless. The benefits of modern medicine have provided many unfortunate women like you the chance to live again. We will help you.’ Dolon begs, ‘Please help us get Kushum’s old face back. I will arrange for the money.’ Ukeel Apa promises to enlist the help of NGOs. She says, ‘About three months ago, some NGOs sent a group of victims of acid attacks abroad for plastic surgery. These girls now have regular jobs!’ With the help of NGOs, Ukeel Apa raises funds for Kushum’s trip. Dolon’s boss in the factory donates Tk. 50,000 (US$1 equals roughly 70 takas) and the workers in the factory raise an additional Tk. 25,000. Unable to come up with the rest of the money and beside himself with anxiety about Kushum’s deteriorating mental health, Dolon shows up at Ukeel Apa’s house with a leather briefcase he hijacked from an ostensibly ‘rich man’ on the street. Demarcating the difference between the two is the large black iron gates separating Ukeel Apa’s house from the street and Dolon. She arrives at the scene in her shiny black car and issues a stern moral directive to Dolon:

Neither you nor I have the right to what’s in the bag. We need to return it to its rightful owner or hand it over to the police. Do you honestly want to restore Kushum’s beauty by such dishonest means? Could you find peace then when you look at that beautiful face? This [restoring Kushum] is our problem, and we need to solve it.

Dolon’s attempt to help Kushum through the only means available to him is thwarted by Ukeel Apa’s moral authority.

As fate would have it, the leather briefcase belongs to Shuvro, Ukeel Apa’s artist friend whom the audience met in the opening shot of the film. When Ukeel Apa was traversing across rural Bangladesh doing research on fatwa-related violence against women, Shuvro was roaming the same rustic roads in search of materials for his art. Unbeknownst
to Kushum, he spots her running along the fields and resting against trees and imagines her as the perfect subject for his art. In Dhaka, he recreates the image of Kushum and holds an art exhibition which makes him a fat profit of Tk. 1.5 lakh. When Ukeel Apa and Dolon come by to return his stolen bag, Shuvro is moved by the story of Kushum’s ‘misfortune’ and donates the profit from his sale for Kushum’s plastic surgery abroad. A grateful Ukeel Apa marvels, ‘I am at a loss for words to appreciate your compassion. You have set an extraordinary example as an artist.’ Shuvro responds, ‘If my earnings come to use for those in need that is the greatest satisfaction I could ask for. I hope I can continue to serve the people in this way.’ Ukeel Apa’s subject position of the human rights activist (one side of the new woman) is shaped by saving Kushum (the flip side of the new woman). The resources that contribute in ‘restoring’ Kushum interestingly were earned by the use of her indirect ‘labor’, or beauty. Ukeel Apa’s dazzling performance in court leads to sentences of death by hanging and life imprisonment for Rameez and Khalek respectively. The film draws to a close with her voice-over asserting, ‘The Kushums of this world want to live’, as we witness Kushum’s return from a presumably Western location fully recovered and into the welcoming arms of her country and husband.

Women figure in development discourse primarily as victims and saviors, represented in the media as victims of violence or agents of protest against violence. These categorical representations obfuscate a host of other complicated issues. The developmentalist narrative positions women as the barometer of both tradition and modernity where they mediate the attack by proponents of tradition on modernity. Victimization of women is addressed with modern inventions and interventions of medicine, law and NGOs. These interventions in turn are delinked from collective and organized action, such as the role of the women’s movement in mobilizing campaigns against violence, relegating the victim (Kushum) to the status of the grateful recipient and her savior (Ukeel Apa) to the status of a lone, heroic and benevolent activist. Furthermore, Kushum is restored through cosmetic surgery in the West and returned to the arms of her loving husband and nation. As an individual bearing no external mark of the physical attack she endured, her reintegration into society is complete, unlike that of other acid violence survivors featured in this film who are not ‘lucky’ enough to get the same treatment. In fact, Kushum looks at them with horror and finds neither support nor community amongst them.

As a tool to raise awareness on violence against women, the emergence of films like Ayna with a social message is coextensive with the proliferation of the discourse of development and modernization in contemporary Bangladesh. This film raises critical social issues and actually humanizes the somewhat ambiguous category ‘garment girls’ used to describe masses of women entering the workforce and public life. Ayna effectively highlights the gendered and classed socio-economic shifts that have taken place in the recent decades as a result of gradual industrialization, the shrinking of agricultural and subsistence-based economy, the transition to monetized economy, growing landlessness and poverty, rural to urban migration, and attendant new gendering patterns of urban space. It also brings out the formation of new kinds of alliances and kinship structures as exemplified by Ukeel Apa and Kushum, and the slum community of factory workers. The competing and co-existing sides of the ‘new woman’ in Ukeel Apa and Kushum bring to the fore ideas of women’s empowerment and objectification, community, sisterhood, and hierarchy, and women as both agents in and pawns of patriarchies. At the same time, however, these depictions make symbols out of women (heroine, victim) rather than locating them in their own particularities. Ayna ultimately cannot escape the dominant discourse of individual uplift and rescuing of third world victims through modern interventions. Nor can it elude the polar categorization of the victimized client and the
feminist matron-patron. This powerful dyad of the transnational identity machine creates an apparatus that makes legible and governable only certain types of gendered subjects and agents. Its conceptualization and depiction of what survivors of acid attack need remains within the frame of a neoliberal discourse that reintegrates individuals into the productive machinery of the state (for example by getting them regular jobs) through the imperialist gendered discourse of restoring victims by cosmetic surgery (provided by the West).

Elsewhere I have argued that transnational networking, particularly in the 1990s, has led to key policy changes related to violence against women, and has positively affected global feminist movements on a local level. The case of Bangladeshi women activists mobilizing a successful campaign against acid violence is an example of this networking (Chowdhury 2007). I have also argued that the same process of transnationalization runs the risk of delinking social movements from locally informed agendas and supplanting them with neoliberal developmentalist programs (Chowdhury 2005). The focus on rehabilitating acid violence survivors through cosmetic surgery in the West, reintegrating them into service sector jobs, and providing for the speedy criminalization of acid-related crimes by donors and the government has not resulted in a sustained engagement with the socio-economic issues underlying the systemic oppression of women and other marginalized groups. In this transnational rhetoric of the NGOs, survivors are represented by a linear narrative that moves from misery to heroism/martyrdom. Similar case studies are abundant in the progress reports of development organizations dealing with income generation and victims of violence in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. The intervening organization and its professionals are seen as guardian angels saving ‘unfortunate’ women from their locally based misfortunes.

The ‘misery to martyrdom’ narrative also obscures the on-the-ground realities of those surviving acid attacks. Because the focus on WID, GAD and gender mainstreaming has led to the proliferation of gender-related programming where the term gender is exchangeable with women, most research reports on acid attacks continue to claim that women are the primary victims. At the same time this narrative fits the still prevalent ‘Third World horror’ framing of violence against women as ‘spectacular’ and ‘aberrant’ in the global South (Grewal 1998; Rajan 2004). A 2007 study by Odhikar, a human rights organization in Bangladesh, claims that acid violence is a common form of violence against women in Bangladesh. In the years 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006 there were 181, 191, 104 and 105 reported cases of acid attacks against women respectively. However, the report also makes note that in the same years the total acid attack cases were 337, 307, 196 and 161 respectively. It is therefore logical to assume at least a third of these reported cases are against men. The circumstances that lead to attacks against men remain unknown. However, the rehabilitation and reintegration programs continue to be framed around the ‘typical case’ of a young and beautiful woman being punished by the spurned suitor and subsequently being saved by benevolent Western donors and NGO professionals. Such linear and simplistic narratives obscure the complex and critical organizing of local women’s movements in response to gender violence.

Conclusions

In some ways Ayna is an important woman-oriented narrative tackling feminist concerns such as gender oppression, violence against women and women’s shifting roles in a transitioning society. The film effectively portrays the coexistence and intersections of multiple patriarchies with power structures such as global capitalism and neoliberal development. In doing so it defies notions of the abject victimization of women by men as well as capitalism as a totalizing project. The film opens up space to look at inequalities
among women and class-based disparities among women and men while simultaneously
setting up polarized images of native women as victims (represented by the economic
underclass) and saviors (as the educated human rights activist) as well as depicting gender
violence and feminist responses to it as rather simplistic. Finally, the film is mired in an
overarching developmentalist narrative that is ultimately patronizing (and, in this case,
matronizing) to women and the working poor. It reinforces modernist notions of uplifting
the disadvantaged through juridical mechanisms of the state, and technical and
professional interventions of the elite and the West, while depicting the poor as gullible,
ineducated and unaware.

Ayna grounds the larger discussion of the emergence and production of competing
notions of the new woman within the context of development, modernization and
globalization schemes in contemporary Bangladesh. It is an example of the new media
interventions that are coextensive with the NGO-ization of social life and with social
movements for change. The message of the film, even as it falls within the genre of human
rights advocacy, reflects and proliferates the linear progress narrative of development and
constructs for itself the heroine feminist savior and the abject victim subject coterminous
with the larger discourses surrounding transnational advocacy. Just as it is important to
ask ‘who does the feminist heroine work for’ in these transnational circuits, it is equally
important to talk about the stories of survival and struggle as opposed to misery and
heroism. Defying the misery to heroism and the victim–savage–savior narratives would
enable a more a complex analysis of women’s lives in struggle and survival – an analysis
that would behoove Ayna in delivering a more inspiring political message.

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Note
1. The proper meaning of the term fatwa is religious opinion meted by Islamic scholars concerning
Islamic law. In Bangladesh, however, various religious leaders issue ‘religious rulings’ that are
legally non-binding but adversely affect marginalized individuals and groups such as women and
the poor.

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El feminismo y su ‘Otro’: representación de la ‘Nueva Mujer’ de Bangladesh

Este ensayo estudia la opresión y la organización contra la violencia de género en el Bangladesh contemporáneo analizado a través de la televisión. Argumento que el telefilme *Ayna* (*The Mirror*, 2006), escrito y dirigido por la popular actriz y activista de los derechos de la mujer, Kabari Sarwar, ofrece una ventana hacia el cambiante paisaje social y económico del Bangladesh contemporáneo y las complejas negociaciones de poder e inequidad a través del género, la clase y la comunidad. Más aún, ofrece una oportunidad para analizar los mensajes sociales que subyacen en las iniciativas de desarrollo y modernización, los nuevos tipos de alianzas, así como las dependencias engendradas por éstas, y sus múltiples y desiguales consecuencias. Una investigación de las representaciones de las nociones contradictorias y en competencia entre sí de la subjetividad y la agencia de las mujeres en este telefilme, nos permite comprender cómo éstas se intersecan con las cambiantes nociones de las patriarquías locales/globales, la solidaridad feminista y el empoderamiento de las mujeres en Bangladesh hoy. También, este ensayo hecha luz sobre la desconexión entre las representaciones de la ‘nueva mujer’ que circulan a través de las narrativas de desarrollo y cierto feminismo, con las realidades de opresión y supervivencia vividas por las mujeres.

**Palabras clave:** discurso de desarrollo; modernidad; feminismo; nueva mujer; patriarquía; Bangladesh

**女性主义及其「他者」：再现孟加拉的「新女性」**

本研究透过电视再现，检视当代孟加拉对的女性压迫及对抗性别暴力之组织。我认为由当红演员及女权倡议者Kabari Sarwar所著并执导的电视剧Ayna (*The Mirror*, 2006), 可做为窥探当代孟加拉社会经济转变, 以及了解横跨性别、阶级与社群的权力及不均间的复杂协商管道。此外, 该电视剧亦提供机会以拆解社会所挟带的发展及现代化企图, 及其所触发的新兴联盟与依赖关系和多重的不均结果。透过分析片中充满冲突及矛盾的女性主体性及能动性的再现，我们得以了解当代孟加拉社会中，这些因素如何与流变中的全球/在地父权主义、女性主义结盟以及女性赋权等向度相互作用。本研究亦进一步指出，此一特定女性主义倡议者叙事中的「新女性」再现，和现实生活中女性所遭受的压迫及生存间存在的落差。

**关键字**: 发展论述、现代性、女性主义、新女性、父权、孟加拉