



Bengali Cultural Identity in Post-Colonial Era: An Analysis of Bengali Cultural Representations

Aftab Ur Rahaman Zahin¹, F.M. Nowruzzaman Nion²

¹⁻²Lecturer, Department of English, Northern University of Business and Technology Khulna, Bangladesh.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.4.823.50050>

ABSTRACT

This research brings out the historical presences, hybridity and fluidity inherent in Bengali cultural identity. Every culture sits in the domain of third space and there is no culture free from foreign influences. Bengali culture has multiple foreign presences historically gained through its evolution of centuries. In cultural representations, people of one culture are commonly shown as one united true self. In 21st Century, the idea of Bengali entity as 'one true self' is a questionable concept since the generations are more hybrid in technological world. Any kind of generalization or national unity in terms of opinions have been become myth as there are multiple intersectional aspects exist in one culture like different religions, languages, communities and historical practices. From such ground, this research aims to find out the foreign presences in Bengali culture, its 'one true self', and the connection of the Bengali community to the past. This research will evaluate the approaches of representing Bengali culture as well. It is a qualitative research. The text, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" written by Stuart Hall, is used as the central instrument for this research and it follow the approach of S. Hall, the way he evaluated the 'Caribbean identity and its presences'

Keywords: Becoming, Identity, Hybridity, Presences, Oneness etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bengali Culture is a production of multiple historical presences, diasporic experiences, cultural hybridity and ethnic multiplicity. When a person claims himself Bengali, he cannot address any characteristic that is fixed and unique as Bengali. There is a broad historical background and multi-cultural influences to produce Bengali culture. This research first identifies the historical presences inherent in Bengali culture and then identifies the Bengali cultural identity of post-colonial era.

According to Stuart Hall, "Cultural identity is a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and constituted within, not outside representation" [7]. Bengali identity is also a production through representation in the process of connecting with the past – an imaginary origin, though it is never constituted in any fixed moment of the past. Identity is an ever changing process through time, place and history. There are two presences in Bengali Identity which are

pre-colonial Bengali Presence and British-European Presence in Bengali Identity. Like Hall's statement on the way of thinking of cultural identity, Bengali people want to represent them 'one true self' through representation of arts. Through the analysis of the artifacts, it is claimed that Bengali Identity is the ever in the process of becoming, rather than being where there is politics of identity, politics of representation and politics of oneness.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The general objective of this research is to evaluate Bengali cultural identity through its historical foreign presences, oneness, and fluidity of Bengali cultural.

Specific Objectives:

1. To find out the foreign historical presences in Bengali Culture.
2. To evaluate the oneness or 'one tree self' of Bengali culture.

3. METHODOLOGY

It is a qualitative research and exploratory in nature. This research applies content analysis method. The major tool of this research is Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". The theoretical stands of Stuart Hall are utilized as instruments for this research. Hall brought out the Caribbean cultural

identity which emerged through diasporic experiences through centuries. By applying Hall's instruments, this research attempts to bring out the evolution of Bengali cultural identity.

4. DISCUSSION

There are two presences evident in Bengali cultural identity which are precolonial Bengali presence and British-European Presence.

4.1 Precolonial Bengali Presence

The first presence is the precolonial Bengali presence. In 21st century, Bengali people are holding some common practices of the precolonial era that gives them sense of conveyer of long past culture. Still today, Bengali wear Saree-Lungi.



Figure 1: Movie: Ghetu Putro Komola.[1]

(Representation of the dress code of precolonial Bengal)

They eat rice and fish, as the best meal since Bengal is a region of rivers. They ride on rickshaw. In the movie, Ghetu Putra Komola, directed by Humayun Ahmed on precolonial era's zamindari system, shows that both zamindar and the locals are wearing Panjabi and lungi. In the movie, Chittagong, those who initially protested the rule of East-India Company, wearing Saree, Dhuti, Lungi and Panjabi. Biryani and Muglai are the iconic food of Bengal which is existing since Mughal Period. These things were existent in precolonial Bengal and rooted in Bengali cultural identity. Therefore, there is precolonial Bengali presence in Bengali Identity.

4.2 British-European Presence

The second presence is the British-European Presence. Through colonial rule of multiple European regimes, from 18th to 20th century, Bengali people adopted a large portion of European practices. Bengali people lost their ethnic origin by the being hybrid in cultural practices. In terms of everyday dresses, people wear shirt, pants, jeans and three pieces. In offices or formal environments, Lungi is strictly prohibited. People call sir or madam instead of calling "Ustaad or Jonab". In urban areas, people are habituated to take fast-food more than their traditional meal of three times in a day. Such Neocolonial practice entered through British Colonizers in Bengal.



Figure 2: Movie: Chittagong.[9]

(Representation of the dress code of the people of British Colonial Bengal)

According to Homi Bhaba, at any colonial rule, the colonized is mimic to the colonizer. Specially, Bengalis mimicry to the British colonizer is much evident and existent in neocolonial period's government policy, constitution, cultural rituals, education system, formal-official dress code, economy and job practices. Today's rickshaw poolers wear shirt and lungi, and people in office wear shirt & pant. The Christian missionaries enhances education and

maximum children in Missionary schools are Muslims and Hindus. It's a Total blend of Bengali and British Presence. Therefore, British-European presence is existent in Bengali Identity.

4.3 'One True Self' and 'Becoming' in Bengali Identity

In a hybrid nation, one true self is nothing but an illusion, almost hypocrisy sometimes. According to Hall, there are two ways of thinking cultural identity. One is one true self or oneness. Another is 'becoming', through similarity and dissimilarity. These are the patterns of positioning. The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, "a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the, many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common". It's a process of inclusion and exclusion, with political and regional agenda that comes out through representation. To show the Bengali as One, they are represented one against foreign colonizers. In the movies based on resistance to the British rule, Hindu-Muslims unitedly shown to be against British. In the movie, based on Liberation war, Bengalis are shown to be undivided one.



Figure 3: Movie: Jibon Theke Neya. [10] (Representation of 'Oneness' or 'One True Self' while Resistance)

There are many dissimilarities too inside these similarities as shared one. Bengali Literature is one of the most prominent literatures around the world. From poet Abdul Hakim in 14th century, to Rabindranath Tagore, Jibanananda Das, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, and Kazi Nazrul Islam, had a great contribution to expose Bengali culture as unique in literature. The Bengali literature through centuries showed Bengali culture as different from others. But in maximum cases, this unique forms represented Bengali as a totalized form, not focusing the micro narratives of common human life, like Tagore was found hardly focusing on the oppressed peasants while writing the nature of Sonar Bangla. Bengali Muslims are silent in him. Jibanananda das and Jasim Uddin wrote on the beauty of Bengali village where the multi-communal voice in Bengal can not be found. Thus, we can get a spectrum of Bengali lifestyle but not clearly the Bengali identity through literature of the past because there were multiple class caste and communities living in Bengal. There are multiple religious and ethnic communities inside this regional site of Bengal, like Hindu, Muslim, Christian etc. Different tribes like Chakma, Santal and Garo grew of Bengalis. All these inclusion and exclusions are superficially imposed for political benefits to show a fixed framed Bengali community. Inside the vague Oneness, there are multi-structural communities. Even the culture is nowadays a hybrid form of multicultural in the era of globalization and internet. The Bengali cultural identity in present days cannot be identified as one. Therefore, it's always in the process of 'becoming' through history and politics.

4.4 Connection with the Past

Absolute return is not possible when it's an ever-changing process and the past is even distorted by the colonial rule. The past we get today is through history, literature and art. Hall quotes Fanon "Colonization is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" [7]. That means the past is no more origin.

We don't know the precolonial past as authentic product. According to Hall "It is not some universal spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return" [7]. But after all, even if we think for the return to the precolonial Bengali Cultural identity, it will be imaginary return for an imagined community which Partha notes "imaginative or figurative belongingness to It constitutes what Benedict Anderson calls 'an imagined community'" an indigestive matter [4]. If we want to rediscover the past, what can be the original past that's a question. Because the capital of ancient Dhaka, Sonargaon is lost but its traditional fame though Mousseline cloth is still in Bengali memory. Such traditional habits are now lost and the connection too. In precolonial period 16th-18th century, was ruled by Afgan, and Parisian Nawabs. The common people of Bengal used to be ruled by zamindars or landlords of different frontiers specially during the 12 Bhuiyans [12]. Before this era, the identity Bengali is scripted in *The Travels of IBN Battuta (1325- 1354)*, written by IBN Battuta who travelled Bengal during 1340s. Ibn Battuta wrote that 'the Bengal is the world of heaven, but it produces a population of massacres.

All natural things are so cheap here. In the rule of landlords, women's lives are decided by men. He almost fainted by witnessing the ritual of Sati, burning Hindu women in the funeral of their husbands. In the name of religion, honor and governance, Bengalis are the stupid living in heaven, according to IBN Battuta. Prior to that era, there was Sen and Pal dynasty, from 7th to 12th century, about which today only the architectural monuments and museum archives are evident. The alignment with the past is nothing but quest for imaginative quest because there are multiple communities changing in different time and place inside one. Therefore, absolute return to the past is not possible. It is only possible in imagination and artistic representation.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

A culture is never a single and autonomous entity of a certain community. It is never out of multi-cultural influence. Like Bengali, inside a culture, people of different religious and ethnic communities live. Again each community has individual culture. A culture is an ever changing process. Therefore, there is no one true self in any culture and absolute return to the idealist nostalgic past is impossible to regain.

The Bengali cultural identity in post-colonial era (1971-present) is a mixture of 5 elements: precolonial presence, British European presence, cultural hybridity, illusive one true self, and illusive cultural representations. There are two historical presences: Precolonial Bengali Presence and British European Presence. Bengali people still maintain the precolonial habits in food, costume and transports. The second presence is the British European Presence, which grew during the colonial period of British Empire. The Bengali follow the neocolonial habits in formal situations which are reflected in language, official manner, stages, dress codes, court and administrative activities. These two historical presences are still present in Bengali culture.

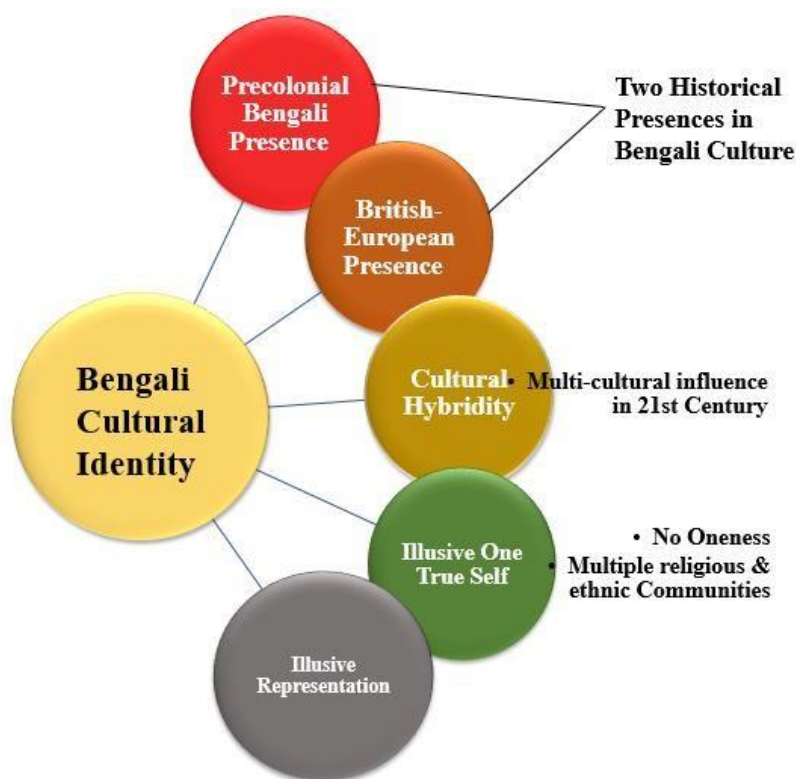


Figure 4: Research Findings

Film is a big genre and instrument of cultural representation. In different films, based on the independence of Bangladesh, it is shown that the entire nation has struggled for revolutionary change during 1952 for mother tongue and 1972 for the liberation of the country. 1952 is highlighted because some students dedicated their life for their mother tongue. Though 1971 was a revolutionary war of the independence of Bangladesh, there were so many parts or corners of the country which remained safe from the destructive influence of the war. Even in independent Bangladesh, movies find some causes to show the entire nation united. Such representations are exaggerated because inside Bengal there are hundreds of separated communities which maintain invisible borders among them, in terms of ethnicity, religion, regions etc. In Bengal, the people wear sari, dhuti and panjabi in the festival of Pahela Baishakh to re-present themselves connected with the past. In reality, in post-colonial era, regular Bengali women do not wear sari for everyday life. In colonial era, sari used to be the compulsory dress for the women of all classes of both Bengal and India. But now, in 21st century, sari has been a formal dress code of the women who are in elite professions. Girls rarely and occasionally wear sari at universities and offices. They wear sari when they need to appear for any formal presentations at universities and offices. In the same way, boys are rarely found habituated in Panjabi. The films representing the past are made by present concepts That means, what the Bengali people address and show as their cultural representation is nothing but a vague idea in 21st century; it does not have connection with the reality. In postcolonial postmodern era, Bengali culture is nothing but a hybrid creation. Therefore, there is no 'one true self' or oneness in Bengali culture and the connection with the 'idealistic original past' is lost.

Historical Presences	Specific Period's Traditional Influence
Precolonial Presence	17 th - 18 th Century Customs
British Colonial Presence	Mid-18 th - 20 th Century Traditions
Postcolonial Presence	Neocolonial Maintenance of the Colonial traditions.
	Cultural hybridity in 21 st century
	Illusive Representation of Culture
	No 'one true self' or oneness
	The connection with the past is lost. Absolute return is not possible because of the multiplicity and hybridity.

Table 1: The Historical Presences in 21st Century Bengali Culture

In 21st century, Bengali culture is a hybrid production of two presences and multiple small cultural communities. As a result, one true self or oneness or single cultural unity is nothing but an illusion. Culture is not out of representations but representation itself is an illusion.

6. CONCLUSION

Culture does not mean to be a single and independent entity. A culture can be an imagined community but it conveys multi-cultural influence. In Bengali Identity, there are two presences evident in Bengali cultural identity: Precolonial Bengali Presence and British European Presence.

Through these presences, Bengali became a hybrid community in which one true self is not evident, rather comes out through representation. There is no fixed precolonial origin of the Bengal, since identity is an ever-changing process transcending time, place and region. Bengali art, literature, historical manuscripts & movies represent Bengali past much more prominent than Halls Caribbean's. These artifacts show the change of Bengali Identity in different time and places. The art of fixed era and place can give a sketch of that period but cannot be terms as the original past, since any piece of art cannot reach all layers of community, class, and other social mores. The rediscovery of the past will be an imaginative attempt. Absolute return to any past is not possible. Therefore, Bengali identity is an ever-changing becoming process of hybrid amalgamation of multiple presences, colonization, religious & ethnic communities and ages of history.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, Humayun, director. Ghetu Putro Komola. Channel I TV, Impress Telefilm.
- Batuta, Ibn, et al. The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, A.D. 1325-1354. Munshiram Manoharla Publishers, 2004.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "The Location of Culture." 2012.
- Chatterjee, Partha. "Whose Imagined Community?." Millennium 20.3 (1991): 521-525.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Studies and the Centre: some problematics and problems." Culture, media, language. Routledge, 2003. 2-35.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural studies: Two paradigms." Media, culture & society (1980): 57-72.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." Undoing Place, 2020, pp. 231-242.,
- Madan, Triloki Nath. "Two Faces of Bengali Ethnicity: Muslim Bengali or Bengali Muslim." The developing economies 10.1 (1972): 74-85.
- Pain, Bedabrata, director. Chittagong. Music Movies & Memes, 12 Oct. 2012.
- Raihan, Zahir, director. Jibon Theke Neyā.
- Van Schendel, Willem. A history of Bangladesh. Cambridge University Press, 2020.