

Pictorial Analysis of Costume Development in Bangla Cinema Posters for the Era of 1980s: as a Reflection of Societal Changes and Cultural Aspirations in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper presents a pictorial analysis of costume development in Bangla cinema posters during the 1980s, examining how visual representations of dress reflect broader societal changes and cultural aspirations in Bangladesh. While existing studies on Bangladeshi cinema have largely focused on narrative and filmic techniques, limited attention has been given to the visual language of promotional media. Using a qualitative visual semiotic approach, this study analyzes costume elements—such as color, silhouette, and fabric—as symbolic indicators of shifting identities. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Roland Barthes (1972), Pierre Bourdieu (1984), and Joanne Entwistle (2015), the paper argues that cinema posters function not only as promotional tools but also as cultural texts that construct aspirational narratives of modernity, gender transformation, and class mobility. The findings demonstrate a move toward a "hybrid aesthetic," where the juxtaposition of traditional attire (Sarees and Panjabis) and Western-influenced garments (leather jackets and suits) stages a visual negotiation between local heritage and global modernity. Ultimately, the study concludes that costume in 1980s posters operates as a vital visual language through which the cultural imagination of a nation in transition was actively constructed and disseminated.

Keywords

Bangla Cinema, Costume Design, Cinema Poster, and Societal Changes

1. Introduction

The 1980s represent a significant transitional phase in Bangladesh, marked by political instability, economic restructuring, and increasing exposure to global cultural influences. Within this transformative landscape, Bangla cinema emerged as a critical medium for both representation and imagination, serving as a primary site where the nation's evolving identity was visually negotiated. Beyond the cinematic text itself, film posters played a crucial role in shaping public perception, functioning as accessible, ubiquitous, and visually compelling cultural artifacts. In a

decade before the digital revolution, these "street-side galleries" were the most pervasive form of visual communication, disseminating modern aspirations to the masses (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The Cinema Poster as a Social Archive: A representative 1980s Bangla film poster showcasing the intersection of cinematic glamour and public visual culture.

Despite the central importance of posters in the South Asian cinematic ecosystem, scholarly attention has largely overlooked their role as sites of deep cultural meaning. Most academic discourse on Bangladeshi film has focused on narrative structures or cinematographic techniques, leaving the visual language of promotional media under-explored. In particular, costume representation within these posters offers a rich dimension for analysis.

Costume operates as far more than an aesthetic component; it functions as a semiotic system that communicates identity, class, gender, and ideological positioning. As Roland Barthes (1972) posits, the garments we wear are a system of signs that "naturalize" social constructs. This paper undertakes a pictorial analysis of costume development in Bangla cinema posters of the 1980s, arguing that these visual representations serve as both reflections and active constructions of societal changes. By positioning costume as a key analytical lens, this study explores the tension between local tradition and global influence, ultimately revealing how a nation in transition reimagined its cultural aspirations through the language of dress.

1.1 Objectives

The objectives of the research are as follows:

- i. Analysis the reflection of societal changes and cultural aspirations in Bangladesh depending on the 1980s cinematography.
- ii. Analyzing the color palette and pattern of 1980's cinemas.
- iii. Develop a new costume depending on the actors and actress's appearances on 1980s cinemas

2. Literature Review

The 1980s marked a significant transitional period in the socio-cultural landscape of Bangladesh. Nearly a decade after independence, the country was undergoing visible changes shaped by political uncertainty, rapid urban migration, economic restructuring, and expanding exposure to transnational media culture (Raju, 2015). Within this transforming environment, popular cinema became one of the most influential forms of mass entertainment and public visual communication. Bangla cinema during this decade not only reflected social realities but also participated in constructing aspirational narratives surrounding urban life, romance, heroism, gender identity, and modernity.

The cinema industry of the 1980s operated within a highly localized yet culturally dynamic environment often referred to as the early formation of “Dhallywood” popular culture. Film production during this period was strongly influenced by melodrama, folk narratives, family-centered social films, romantic cinema, and action-oriented storytelling (Raju, 2015). Actors such as Razzak, Jashim, Ilias Kanchan, Shabana, and Bobita emerged not only as cinematic figures but also as visual icons whose appearances significantly shaped popular understandings of beauty, masculinity, glamour, and social aspiration.

Before the expansion of television broadcasting and long before digital media culture, cinema posters functioned as one of the most publicly accessible visual mediums in Bangladesh. Large-scale hand-painted and printed posters were displayed across cinema halls, roadside walls, urban intersections, marketplaces, transportation terminals, and small-town commercial centers. These posters operated simultaneously as advertisements, entertainment imagery, and public visual spectacles (Dwyer and Patel, 2002). In many cases, audiences encountered the poster image before encountering the film itself, allowing costume, makeup, gesture, and stylized body presentation to shape cinematic expectation and social imagination.

The visual language of Bangla cinema posters during the 1980s reflected a society negotiating between inherited cultural traditions and emerging forms of urban modernity. Traditional Bengali dress—such as sarees, panjabis, lungis, and regional textile motifs—continued to appear prominently within poster compositions. However, the decade also witnessed the increasing visibility of Western-inspired tailoring, denim fashion, fitted silhouettes, synthetic fabrics, oversized accessories, and stylized cosmetic presentation influenced by global cinema and transnational popular culture (Entwistle, 2015). These transformations reflected broader changes occurring within middle-class urban aspiration, consumer desire, and youth identity formation in Bangladesh.

The circulation of imported films, Indian cinematic influence, music videos, magazine photography, and international fashion imagery contributed to the gradual transformation of visual aesthetics within Bangladeshi popular culture. As urban centers such as Dhaka experienced intensified commercialization and consumer visibility, cinema posters began presenting characters through increasingly dramatized representations of glamour and mobility. The cinematic body became a surface upon which ideas of sophistication, modern romance, economic aspiration, and cosmopolitan identity were visually projected.

At the same time, the persistence of folk motifs, traditional costume structures, and culturally recognizable dress codes suggests that modernization within Bangladeshi cinema was not a complete rejection of local identity. Rather, the posters of the 1980s reveal an ongoing process of visual negotiation in which local cultural memory coexisted with the desire for global belonging. This coexistence produced a distinctly hybrid visual culture that became central to the aesthetic identity of Bangla cinema during the decade.

Understanding this historical context is essential because costume representation within cinema posters did not emerge in isolation. The garments, silhouettes, styling methods, and visual compositions observed in these posters were deeply connected to broader social transformations occurring within Bangladeshi urban life, gender relations, consumer imagination, and post-independence cultural identity formation.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative pictorial and visual semiotic analysis of Bangla cinema posters produced between 1980 and 1990. To ensure a comprehensive overview of the decade, a curated selection of posters was chosen, representing

various genres (social drama, action, and folk-fantasy) and character archetypes. These posters are treated as "cultural texts" situated within the specific socio-historical context of post-independence Bangladesh.

The analytical framework is structured into three distinct interpretive levels, based on Barthes' (1972) semiotic model:

- i. **Denotation (The Visible):** This level involves the systematic identification of visible costume elements. This includes documenting specific colors (using chromatic extraction), identifying silhouettes (the shape and cut of the garments), and the visual representation of fabrics (noting textures like silk, denim, or cotton).
- ii. **Connotation (The Symbolic):** Here, the study interprets the symbolic meanings of the identified elements. This level analyzes how these sartorial choices signify specific gender roles, class identity, and the character's alignment with modernity or tradition.
- iii. **Myth (The Narrative):** The final level involves the articulation of broader cultural narratives. The study examines how these individual signs coalesce to create "myths" of national aspiration, transformation, and the reimagining of the modern Bangladeshi identity.

By employing this tripartite approach, the study moves from a simple visual description to a deep understanding of costume as a visual language embedded in the national cultural discourse (Figure 2 and 3).



Figure 2: Visual Analysis of 1980s-1990s Cinema Poster Aesthetics



Figure 3: Chromatic Extraction and Color Semiotics: A systematic analysis of the 1980s poster palette, illustrating the analytical process of identifying thematic shifts through color.

4. Costume Development and the Visualization of Modernity

The pictorial analysis reveals that costume development in 1980s Bangla cinema posters reflects a dynamic and often paradoxical negotiation between traditional and modern identities. During this decade, the "visual stage" of the poster became a site where modernity was not just displayed, but actively constructed.

4.1 The Hybrid Aesthetic

Traditional attire—such as Sarees, Panjabis, and Lungis—continued to be prominently featured, symbolizing cultural rootedness, moral authenticity, and "Bengliness." However, the 1980s introduced a shift toward a hybrid aesthetic. In many posters, characters are depicted wearing traditional drapes modified with modern design elements, such as

puffed sleeves or stylized embroidery. This suggests a society that was "staging" modernity while refusing to let go of its cultural anchors.

4.2 Western Markers of Urban Aspiration

In sharp contrast to the pastoral themes of the previous decade, Western-influenced garments—such as tailored suits, denim, and leather jackets—emerged as powerful visual markers of urban aspiration. As the analysis of the posters shows (Figure 4):

- The Suit became synonymous with the "Successful Modern Professional," reflecting a desire for global economic mobility.
- Denim and Leather functioned as signs of "Youthful Rebellion" and an alignment with global pop culture.



Figure 4: Longitudinal Analysis of Sartorial Silhouettes: A comparative study showcasing the 1980s transition from rural folk-attire to Western-influenced urban tailoring as a marker of global aspiration.

4.3 Taste as Symbolic Capital

Drawing on Bourdieu (1984), this study argues that the adoption of Western fashion in poster art operated as a form of symbolic capital. For the 1980s audience, these costumes were not just clothes; they were "visual dreams" of a life beyond their current material reality. The coexistence of the traditional and the modern in a single poster frame indicates that modernity in Bangladesh was being imagined as a synthesis—a way to move forward without losing the national self. Costume, therefore, became the primary medium through which this "modern identity" was both imagined and performed.

5. Gender Representation and Costume Transformation

The pictorial evolution of costume in 1980s cinema posters reflects significant shifts in gender representation, serving as a visual barometer for the changing status of men and women in Bangladeshi society. These transformations signal the emergence of new identities that sought to navigate the tension between domestic tradition and public agency.

5.1 The Reimagined Feminine Identity

Female characters, traditionally depicted in posters through modest, earthy-toned sarees, underwent a radical stylization during this decade. The analysis reveals a shift toward bold, vibrant colors (such as electric pinks and magentas) and structured silhouettes (Figure 5).

- **Structured Shoulders and Sleeves:** The introduction of puffed sleeves and padded shoulders mirrored global 1980s power-dressing trends. This sartorial shift signaled a move away from the "passive" rural heroine toward a more assertive, urban persona.
- **The Modern Saree:** The saree remained central, but its depiction changed. It became a site of "modern glamour," often paired with Western-style jewelry and exaggerated makeup (Kajal and metallic shadows), reflecting a femininity that was becoming increasingly aware of its own public agency.



Figure 5: Visualizing the New Feminine Identity: Analysis of stylized heroines featuring bold 80s makeup.

5.2 Reconfiguring Masculinity

Male costume similarly evolved, shifting from the traditional Lungi and Panjabi—symbols of the common man and rural authenticity—to Westernized forms such as jeans, structured jackets, and formal suits.

- **The Urban Rebel:** The frequent depiction of male leads in denim and leather jackets aligned the "Bangladeshi Hero" with global youth culture and the "Angry Young Man" archetype.
- **Symbolic Masculinity:** As Barthes (1972) indicates, visual signs operate within specific cultural codes; thus, the switch to Western tailoring was a reconfiguration of masculinity. It communicated a new type of power—one based on urban success, individual mobility, and a departure from agrarian roots.

5.3 Performance of Idealized Roles

Importantly, these representations did not merely reflect existing social changes; they actively performed and projected idealized gender roles (Entwistle, 2015). By placing these "modernized" bodies on the street-side posters, cinema provided a visual template for how the modern Bangladeshi man and woman should look and behave. Costume was the primary tool used to make these new, aspirational gender identities feel both attainable and desirable to the masses.

6. Costume and Cultural Aspirations

In the 1980s, the cinema poster functioned as a powerful indicator of the "national dream." Costume was the primary vehicle through which these aspirations were communicated to a population experiencing rapid urbanization and economic shift.

6.1 Materiality and the Language of Class

Fabric choices and color intensity served as a visual shorthand for social hierarchy. As the analysis shows, luxurious materials (such as silk, satin, and heavy embroidery) were consistently associated with elite, modern identities. In contrast, simpler garments—depicted with flatter colors and traditional textures—were linked to rural or lower-class contexts. However, the 1980s posters frequently blurred these lines. By depicting characters from modest backgrounds in "aspirational" attire that exceeded their everyday realities, posters created a symbolic pathway toward upward mobility (Figure 6).



Figure 6: The Dichotomy of the Modern Hero: Juxtaposing high-status sartorial markers with cinematic glamour to reflect the national aspiration for upward mobility and urban success.

6.2 The Global-Local Synthesis

The research identifies a clear desire for global belonging. The inclusion of Western accessories—sunglasses, watches, and structured collars—alongside traditional Bengali dress suggests a nation that did not want to choose

between its roots and the world. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) concept of Cultural Capital, these aesthetic choices functioned as mediators between social structure and individual desire. To wear (or even to view) these costumes was to participate in a "Modernity" that was uniquely Bangladeshi.

6.3 Visualizing the Future

Ultimately, costume became the visual language through which societal desires—modernity, progress, and a move toward an urbanized future—were articulated. The 1980s posters did not just show characters; they showed ideals. Whether it was the "Self-Made Man" in a tailored suit or the "Educated Modern Woman" in a stylized saree, the posters provided a visual map of where the citizens of Bangladesh aspired to go.

7. Discussion: Posters as Cultural Artifacts

By repositioning the 1980s cinema poster as a cultural artifact rather than a mere commercial tool, this study uncovers the silent history of a nation's visual evolution. The costume developments analyzed throughout this research provide a unique entry point into the "lived modernity" of Bangladesh during a decade of intense transition.

7.1 The Poster as a "Social Archive"

Unlike formal photography or fashion magazines, which were accessible only to the elite, the cinema poster was a democratized visual medium. As a cultural artifact, it documented the "popular aesthetic" of the 1980s. The sartorial shifts—from the pastoral to the urban—serve as a visual archive of how the Bangladeshi public negotiated their identity in the wake of globalization. The poster artists, while aiming for glamour, inadvertently recorded the changing textures, colors, and silhouettes that the society deemed modern and desirable (Figure 7).



Figure 7: The Poster as a Cultural Artifact: A hand-painted cinema poster serving as a physical archive of the era's popular aesthetic and visual history.

7.2 Reconciling the Local and Global

The findings suggest that 1980s modernity in Bangladesh was not a process of "Westernization," but rather one of sartorial synthesis. The coexistence of the Saree and the Leather Jacket in a single visual frame represents a society that was re-creating itself. Drawing on Entwistle's (2015) theory of the "social body," we see that these posters created a new type of "Bangladeshi Body"—one that was rooted in tradition but equipped for the modern world. This hybridity is the hallmark of the 1980s cultural psyche.

7.3 Beyond the Screen: Influence on Social Reality

The discussion must acknowledge that the "aspirations" depicted in posters often bled into social reality. The exaggerated makeup and structured silhouettes seen on iconic stars like Shabana or Babita became templates for actual

wedding fashion and middle-class attire. Thus, the poster functioned as a feedback loop: it reflected societal changes while simultaneously providing the visual vocabulary for people to perform those changes in their own lives.

8. Conclusion

This study has examined the development of costume representation in 1980s Bangla cinema posters as a reflection of broader socio-cultural transformation within Bangladesh. Through qualitative visual analysis, the research demonstrates that costume functioned not merely as a cinematic styling device, but as an important cultural language through which ideas of modernity, gender identity, class aspiration, and national belonging were visually communicated to mass audiences (Figure 8). visual representations contributed to shaping broader popular understandings of modern identity within late twentieth-century Bangladesh. But also for understanding how a society visually imagined its transition toward modernity during the 1980s.



Figure 8: This Image Is All Posters From 1980s To 1990s Mood And Color.

80S FABRIC INSPIRATION IMAGE



Figure 9: An Example Of 80s Traditional Fabric's Floral Print Motif Use

MY DEVELOP DESIGN



Figure 10: An Example Of 80s Traditional Fabric's Floral Print Motif Re-Created For 2026 Fabric Print

80s Poster Collected



My Develop Design



TRADITIONAL VS. MODERN

Figure 11: An Example Of 80s Traditional Sharee Vs. 2026 Modern Saree

The findings reveal that the poster aesthetics of the decade were shaped by a process of visual hybridity in which traditional Bengali dress practices coexisted with emerging Western-inspired fashion influences. Sarees, panjabis, and culturally familiar textile forms remained central to cinematic representation, even as tailored silhouettes, glamour-oriented styling, denim fashion, and urban visual codes gained increasing prominence. This coexistence reflected a society negotiating modernization while simultaneously attempting to preserve recognizable cultural identity.

The research further demonstrates that cinema posters operated as publicly circulated aspirational surfaces through which audiences encountered imagined forms of urban sophistication, romance, beauty, and social mobility. Costume became central to this process because dress allowed abstract social transformations to be translated into visible and emotionally accessible imagery. Through repeated circulation across streets, cinema halls, and marketplaces, these By positioning Bangla cinema posters as significant visual-cultural artifacts, this study contributes to the growing academic discussion surrounding South Asian popular visual culture, fashion representation, and cinematic aesthetics. More importantly, it highlights the importance of costume as an analytical lens through which historical shifts in public imagination and cultural aspiration may be interpreted (Figure 9-11).

Although many original posters from the decade remain poorly archived or physically lost, their surviving visual traces continue to preserve the aesthetic memory of a transformative cultural moment. The costumes represented within these posters remain important not only for understanding Bangladeshi cinema history

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Biographies

Md Alamgir Hossain is a distinguished academician, researcher, and university administrator currently serving as the Pro Vice Chancellor (Acting) of BGMEA University of Fashion & Technology. He joined BUFT in January 2023 as a Professor of Industrial Engineering and later served as the Dean of the Faculty of Fashion Studies before assuming higher administrative responsibilities. Professor Hossain previously held important academic and leadership positions at Sonargaon University and Military Institute of Science and Technology, where he contributed significantly to teaching, research, and quality assurance activities. He earned his undergraduate degree from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology and completed his PhD from Swinburne University of Technology in 2005. An active researcher, Professor Hossain has published more than 50 research articles in national and international journals and conference proceedings. His research interests include Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD), fluid mechanics, machine design, and CAD modeling. He is widely respected for his dedication to higher education, academic excellence, and institutional development in Bangladesh.

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Nishat Yesmin Khan is an innovative Fashion Designer specializing in 3D and virtual fashion design. She currently works at a reputed garments factory in Bangladesh, bridging traditional manufacturing with cutting-edge digital

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