

Representation of Muslim Women in Advertisements in Post-Independence Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of Muslim women in advertisements in post-independence Bangladesh and explores how these portrayals have been shaped by cultural, religious, and economic changes over time. Since 1971, shifting political ideologies, economic development, and globalization have influenced the portrayal of Muslim women in media, evolving from traditional Bengali image to more modern, often Western-influenced portrayals. Yet, these modern portrayals are often overshadowed by patriarchal representations that reinforce the stereotypical gender roles prevalent in South Asian societies. By analyzing Bangladeshi print advertisements from the 1970s–80s, 1990s, and the 21st century, this study examines clothing patterns, gender roles, and class to understand how the media has both shaped and reflected the changing identities of Muslim women. The paper argues that although contemporary media foregrounds the image of empowered Muslim women in public and professional spaces, it still relies heavily on culturally and religiously embedded stereotypes. Overall, this research highlights the complex process of identity formation among Muslim women and demonstrates how these changes are reflected in Bangladeshi visual media representations.

Keywords: media representation, Muslim women, Bangladeshi advertisements, post-independence, identity, ideology, stereotype, and globalization

1. Introduction

Bangladesh has undergone numerous reforms since its independence in 1971, be it structural or spiritual. Throughout this process of transformation, the people have conformed to identities shaped by the ideologies of the ruling political parties. The shifting political agendas of the major parties have created a divide between “Bengali identity” and “Muslim identity”, which has continued to shape the nation’s identity since liberation (Khondker, 2016). These parties have used Bengali nationalism and religious sentiments to influence the masses and shape the broader national identity. The reflection of these identities can be observed in various visual media representations from the birth of the nation to the present day. However, to understand this identity formation, several factors need to be considered, including religion, culture, and economy. These factors, combined with the portrayal of standardized beauty in media, create unrealistic expectations (Jalees & Majid, 2009) among Muslim women.

My research explores how Muslim women were portrayed in the media during the early post-independence years, and how this representation conforms to gender expectations, performing domestic roles, and wearing traditional attire. Later, this representation evolved with the shift in gender roles, reflecting the growing influence of Western culture. Yet, many modern Muslim women continue to embrace certain markers of Islamic clothing, irrespective of their class and gender roles. This research investigates the transformation of Muslim women’s representation from 1971 to the present, analyzing how media have both reflected and contributed to this transition.

In the early days of independence, following the long-awaited liberation from Pakistani rule, public sentiment was driven by anti-Pakistani ideologies. This sentiment had already taken shape during the Pakistani period (1947-1971), as people became more aware of their “distinct Bengali identity” (Khondker, 2016). This sentiment manifested in social and cultural life, where the masses rejected certain markers of Muslim identity and instead embraced the Bengali identity. When the Awami League (AL) first came to power (1971 to 1975), it promoted Bengali nationalism, and the masses embraced this identity (Shehabuddin, 2016). However, this identity soon became more convoluted as political ideologies shifted. The subsequent ruling party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), emphasized Bangladeshi

nationalism, which sought to distinguish between “Indian Bengalis” and “Bangladeshi Bengalis”, focusing on Muslim identity (Shehabuddin, 2016). While many people liberated themselves from political influences, others chose to be identified through their religion. However, when religion became part of the modern nation’s identity, the religious ideologies became “relatively flexible” (Islam & Marzia, 2013). This flexibility is reflected in one of the major discourse generators, visual media, which has portrayed Muslim women in ways that respond to the ever-evolving sentiments of its audience.

This research primarily investigates the representations of Muslim women in Bangladeshi advertisements from the post-independence period to the present. Previous studies on visual media, particularly advertisements, have studied consumer culture within capitalist societies and the way media exploits the female body (Kumar, 2017). The target audience for most advertisements has traditionally been male, with women confined to stereotyped roles (Luo, 2022). Bangladesh is no exception, as its media perpetuates traditional gender roles that place high expectations on women in every sphere of life. However, the 21st century has witnessed noticeable shifts in gender roles that are redefining social dynamics in positive ways (Nahar, 2019). Drawing on these issues, this research questions the identity formation of Muslim women in Bangladeshi visual media and how these gender dynamics are portrayed over time. Grounded in the portrayal of gender dynamics across different periods, this study investigates the visual representation of Muslim women of Bangladesh to understand how their identities have been constructed and transformed over time.

2. Literature Review

Since the emergence of print and visual media, women have consistently been objectified by the male gaze, irrespective of their culture (Nahar, 2019). In the West, women have been objectified over the last five decades, with their sexual appeal strategically used to influence consumers (Kumar, 2017). This global trend has also influenced the visual representation of women in Bangladesh, where the Westernized portrayals of femininity became the standard in local media (Nahar, 2019). To appear desirable and trendy, many young women tried to meet these media-defined beauty standards. Consequently, female roles and expressions of femininity in late capitalist societies have been shaped by the visual representations in advertisements (Luo, 2022).

During the 1970s and 1980s, visual media portrayed limited gender roles for women, leaving little room for diversity or individuality (Cortese, 2008). This narrow portrayal of feminine roles fostered unrealistic social expectations, where deviation from the norm was often viewed as resistance or even defiance (Cortese, 2008). These expectations were mostly related to physical beauty (Jalees & Majid, 2009) and female submission (Cortese, 2008) within a patriarchal framework. Such representations resonated in a time when women were not financially independent, and men were seen as the primary target consumers. However, as women have gained financial independence and become prospective consumers, the advertising strategies have shifted toward the “idealized images of femininity” (Gill, 2008). Yet even these images are problematic, as the advertising industry often presents women as sexually empowered figures who overpower their sexual partner, ultimately reinforcing a different kind of objectification (Gill, 2008).

Furthermore, Western representations of Muslim women have long been dominated by Orientalist stereotypes, portraying them as the “oppressed other” under Islamic patriarchy (Ahmed, 2006). This representation has contributed to the spread of islamophobia globally, while the Muslim population of Bangladesh negated it via more realistic representations in visual media. As Edward Said (1978) argues, the Western tendency to show Oriental women as problems that need to be solved reflects a broader politics of cultural misrepresentation. In brief, visual media has positioned women in a vulnerable state, be it as submissive and sexually objectified or as the oppressed others. However, recent visual representations have increasingly rejected the stereotypes, demonstrating a sense of ethical responsibility (Kumar, 2017).

Breaking the stereotype of the Western gaze, Bangladeshi visual media portrayed empowered Muslim women. These portrayals move beyond the early post-independence focus on Bengali identity and anti-Pakistani sentiments (Khondker, 2016) to embrace a more complex identity that intertwines both Bengali and Muslim elements. This research investigates these shifts in the portrayal of Muslim women and how their identity formation has conformed the visual representation in Bangladeshi advertisements.

3. Methodology

This research examines Bangladeshi advertisements from 1972 to the present to explore the representation of Muslim women in visual media. The research employs the following methodological framework that outlines the research questions, sampling strategy, and analytical methods used in the study:

Research questions:

1. What political, cultural, and economic factors determine the representation of Muslim women in Bangladeshi advertisements?

2. How does the shifting ideology of Bangladesh shape the identity formation of Muslim women in visual media?
3. What are the markers of these changing identities of Muslim women represented across different time periods?

A longitudinal content analysis was conducted to compare the contemporary perspective with the earlier representations (Byrd-Bredbenner, 2002). As the study covers post-independence to the present, it addresses the ideological shifts that have influenced the identity formation of Muslim women over time. To showcase these transitions, the advertisements were categorized into three distinct timelines. The first timeline (1970s to 80s) represents the post-independence period, focusing first on the dominant party's ideology, and later, the influence of successive political regimes on these visual representations. The second timeline (1990s to 2000) marks a period of transition when Western influence began shaping local culture and gender portrayals. Lastly, the third timeline (2000 to present) highlights contemporary representations shaped by globalization and modernity.

The sampling strategy followed Rose's guideline of selecting images that are both "representative and significant" for content analysis (Rose, 2001). Accordingly, I selected advertisements that depict the markers of Bengali and/or Muslim identity in women and reflect the cultural and Islamic norms of Bangladesh. Furthermore, "conceptually interesting" images were included for a detailed "semiological study" (Rose, 2001). The advertisements were collected primarily from several newspaper archives, particularly the weekly magazine *Shaptahik Bichitra*, while recent samples were collected from various brands' Facebook pages. Each timeline was analyzed in relation to its broader social, cultural, economic, and political contexts to identify significant ideological shifts reflected in visual media.

A combination of "content analysis" and "semiological study" was conducted to select and interpret the advertisements (Rose, 2001). Compositional interpretation and social modalities were employed to examine the formal qualities of these advertisements (Rose, 2001). For compositional interpretation, elements such as content, color, and spatial organization were analyzed. Additionally, for social modalities, the economic, political, and social relations are considered.

Furthermore, a semiological study was carried out to interpret the "signs of humans" in advertisements, including the representation of bodies, manner, activity, props, and settings (Rose, 2001). The semiological analysis followed Stuart Hall's (1997) framework of sign, signifier, and signified (Rose, 2001). Here, "sign" refers to the combination of "signifier" (the image or the advertisement) and "signified" (the meaning derived from the image). The representation of bodies (stereotyped femininity and masculinity), manner (submissive eye contact and passive expression of women), activity (household chores and inferior/superior position), props and setting (objects and the environment) within the images produce certain signifieds. These signified meanings derived from these visual representations generate shared mental concepts among people within the same culture. For example, representations of bodies, particularly in relation to gender, often portray the stereotype of the active, rational male and the passive, emotional female. Such depictions signify underlying power inequality between genders and shape audiences' mental image of masculinity and femininity.

4. Theoretical Framework

A semiological study is incomplete without addressing the role of ideology in the visual media discourse. "Ideology is those representations that reflect the interests of power" (Rose, 2001). To be precise, there are power inequalities in society where the dominant groups impose their interests on subordinate groups via knowledge creation to legitimize their rule. In this study, Althusser's (1971) concept of Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), particularly the communications ISA to visual media, provides a lens for understanding the interplay between power and knowledge. Knowledge produced by visual media functions as a key communication ISA, generating discourses via representations that normalize dominant values and sustain systems of control. Through such representations, political authorities may disseminate shifting ideological agendas—often involving religious or cultural ISAs—while patriarchal structures further reinforce these norms. For women, this results in *double subjugation*: domination by both state ideology and male authority.

Michel Foucault's (1980) theorization of power and discourse further clarifies how the media operates beyond direct state control. According to Foucault, discourses shape individuals' behaviors, subjectivities, and sense of self. In post-independence Bangladesh, the advertising industry played a critical role in producing visual discourses that shaped the identity formation of Muslim women. These representations largely served patriarchal interests, depicting women either as traditional homemakers confined to domestic tasks or as seductive figures designed to attract male attention.

To understand these limited and repetitive portrayals, this study also draws on Rosabeth Moss Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism. Token images reduce marginalized groups, especially women, to stereotypical, highly simplified roles. Women are typically represented through two simplified archetypes for men to understand: the role of mother and seductress (Kanter, 1977; Grant, 2017). This clarifies why Bangladeshi advertisements from the 1970s to the 1990s relied heavily on these stereotypical portrayals of women.

Additionally, Laura Mulvey's (1975) notions of "scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect" and the "male gaze" illuminate how spectatorship shapes gendered identities. Female viewers may identify with models on screen, especially when those models are positioned as objects of male desire. While scopophilic pleasure can apply across genders, Mulvey's "male gaze" theory is crucial for analyzing how visual media constructs women as passive, sexualized objects for male voyeuristic pleasure. Such portrayals reaffirm patriarchal ideologies that position women as objects of male pleasure and convenience, while simultaneously reinforcing the unequal power relations embedded in visual culture.

Foucault's (1980) claim that "where there is power, there is resistance" is equally relevant. As dominant discourses generate oppression, counter-discourses inevitably emerge. Contemporary Bangladeshi advertisements increasingly reflect such forms of resistance, challenging earlier stereotypes and offering feminist reinterpretations of Muslim women's roles. These newer representations embrace more complex and diverse experiences of Muslim women, signaling a shift in how female identities are represented and negotiated in the cultural sphere.

5. Discussion

1.1 Post-independence Representation (1970s to 1980s)

As members of the same culture, we share a "cultural code" through which our thoughts and emotions align (Hall, 1997). In this sense, while interpreting visual images, we "must all interpret body language and facial expressions in broadly similar ways". Therefore, when analyzing advertisements, all their formal visual elements—such as content, clothing, color, and spatial organization (Rose, 2001), gestures, and expressions—carry meanings that are interpreted similarly by members of the same cultural group (Hall, 1997).

Following independence in 1971, during the nation-building process shaped by an anti-Pakistani sentiment (Khondker, 2016), most advertisements prioritized the Bengali identity of Bangladeshi Muslim women. This period marked the nation's effort to establish an independent Bengali identity, reflecting a shared sense of thought and emotion among the masses. Consequently, the majority rejected traditional Muslim attire, such as the veil, burka, or hijab, and instead embraced the markers of Bengali culture. This shift is evident in the advertisements of the early 70s, where Muslim women were portrayed wearing a sari and a 'tip' (a decorative dot on the forehead) (Figure 1).

Here, the female model dressed in a yellow sari with a red 'tip' (signifier) embodies the essence of Bengali identity (signified) (Hall, 1997). These markers of Bengali attire reflect the political and social influences, which is one of the "social modalities" (Rose, 2001). The red 'tip' (compositional modalities: color) (Rose, 2001) with sari, a common feature of Indian Bengali attire, was embraced by Bangladeshi women as their expression of shared Bengali identity. Thus, this "prop", categorized as one of the "signs of humans" (Rose, 2001), also indicates the influence of the ruling party, AL (Awami League), in shaping national identity, given their close relation to India (Shehabuddin, 2016). This visual representation conforms to the celebration of Bengali nationalism during AL's rule, while simultaneously signifying the rejection of a distinct Muslim identity.



Figure 1. Cute Shampoo Advertisement (Source: *Shaptahik Bichitra*, December 1984)

However, when examining advertisements from the 1980s, a complete shift in women's clothing is observed: from sari to salwar kamiz (suit and trousers) paired with a dupatta (scarf) (see Figures 2 & 3). This change in clothing pattern reflects the ruling party's, BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party), imposition of Islamic credentials during the 1980s (Shehabuddin, 2016). Furthermore, analyzing the body language and facial expressions (Hall, 1997) of women in these advertisements reveal a distinctly submissive tone. This demonstrates how the “signs of humans”—specifically the representations of “body” and “manners” (Rose, 2001) are portrayed differently in the eighties.

For instance, Figure 2 visualizes a woman holding a flower (representation of props) and looking downward (representation of manners), symbolizing female submissiveness. Her averted gaze conveys passivity and compliance. Similarly, Figure 3 demonstrates a modern woman with a Diana-style haircut (representation of body: hair), gazing down at her shoes (representation of manners) (Rose, 2001). Although this is a shoe advertisement, the model's body language is notably subdued. The way she is sitting, looking down with her hands resting on her knees, conveys coyness.

Such portrayals align with patriarchal ideas in which a submissive woman is not only desirable but also preferred in real life (Cortese, 2008). These advertisements, therefore, were not merely selling products but also reinforcing the patriarchal ideal of passive femininity. As Ross and Byerly (2008) said, media representations of women often display passivity and submissiveness within traditional advertisements. Moreover, in several cultures, females are linked to flowers, the “representation of props” (Rose, 2001), that signify fragility, beauty, and ornamental value for the patriarchal pleasure (Luo, 2022). Hence, the audiences of the 1980s were consuming not only the advertised products but also the symbolic representation of the submissive Muslim woman embedded within them.

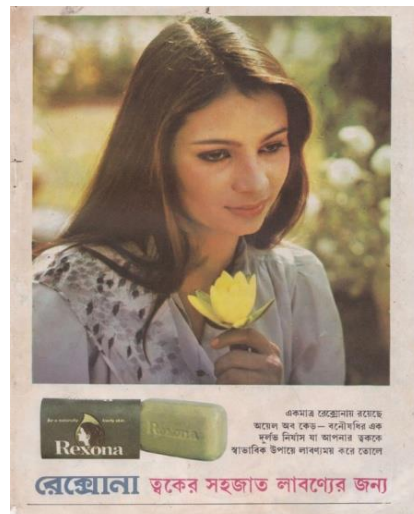


Figure 2. Rexona Advertisement (Source: *Shaptahik Bichitra*, August 1987)

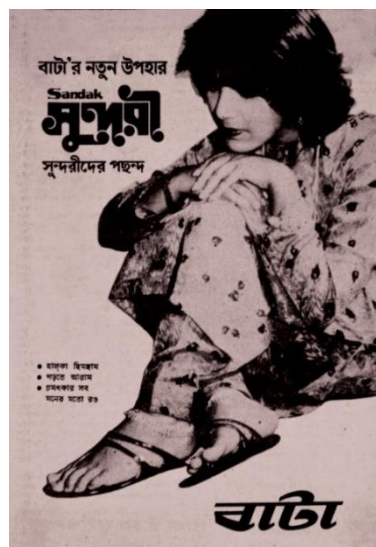


Figure 3. Bata Advertisement (Source: *Bitopi Leo Burnett*, August 1984)

Moreover, if members of the same culture, both men and women, interpret such passive body language and facial expressions as representations of submissiveness or as markers of Muslim women's identity, then it becomes difficult to imagine portrayals of strong and empowered women within the community after the liberation. As Mulvey's (1975) portrayal of "scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect" illustrates, there is a "love affair/despair between image and self-image", where the audience forms a connection between the screen and the mirror. This form of narcissism, generated by the image or the screen, can initiate a relation between the female audience and the glamorous actor on the screen. The viewer perceives the actor as an idealized version of herself—someone who is more beautiful, more admired, and more desirable to the male gaze.

If the eighties audiences or consumers related to these advertisement images of submissive femininity within a patriarchal culture, it suggests that many women internalized such portrayals as aspirational. Consequently, women are conditioned to embody submissiveness in real life, identifying with these idealized prototypes who appear more desirable in their passivity.



Figure 4. Zam-Buk Advertisement (Source: *Bitopi Leo Burnett*, June 1972)

Another recurring representation of Muslim women combines traditional Bengali identity with domestic responsibility—depicted through traditional attire (sari) and the act of caring for a child. This portrays women in their conventional household roles, exemplifying the “representation of activity” (Rose, 2001) (see Figure 4). In the “Zam-Buk” advertisement, for instance, the woman is shown as a nurturing mother tending to her child, while the father is notably absent from the frame. This portrayal reflects the persistence of Freudian archetypes in Bangladeshi media, where women are categorized in two stereotypical roles: mother and seductress (Kanter, 1977). The maternal figure represents a caring, selfless, and sympathetic personality, whereas the seductress represents an anti-maternal personality—one associated with desire and sexual tension, functioning as a sexual object (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Flora Soap Advertisement (Source: *Doinik Bangla*, March 1978)

Initially, advertisements portray a female body to attract the audience, later recontextualizing women as a domestic figure (Luo, 2022). The female body is often highlighted, or when necessary, bare skin is displayed seductively, to attract the consumer, especially in cosmetic advertisements (see Figure 5). When not objectified, women are instead depicted in nurturing motherly roles that position them as subordinates to men (see Figure 4). Such portrayals are especially common in advertisements for household appliances.

In both cases, women become victims of role entrapment—a recurring pattern in media representation that confines them to limited gender roles. This role entrapment becomes the defining identity of the general female population, restricting them from being anything different or deviating from convention (Grant, 2017). Over time, these media-imposed stereotypes turn into the accepted image of Muslim women in society.

1.2 The Transition Period (90s to early 2000)

Visual media, particularly advertisements, generate content targeting the consumer culture. If advertisements can evoke a sense of incompleteness within consumers, there is a high chance of a guaranteed profit. In a capitalist society, this sense of inadequacy is evoked by the portrayal of rare beauty, as this would increase the likelihood of consumption. The image of an attractive woman is frequently visualized in print media to promote an unrealistic standard of beauty that bears little resemblance to real life (Cortese, 2008). Over time, this rare and idealized representation becomes normalized through repetition, gradually transforming into the societal standard of beauty and femininity.

In addition, when the sexual imbalance between “active/male” and “passive/female” determines visual pleasure, the female body inevitably becomes an object of the gaze on the screen (Mulvey, 1975). This dynamic reinforces patriarchal ideology, as it grants men voyeuristic pleasure through the objectification of women. In Figure 6, this voyeuristic pleasure is exemplified through the depiction of two men gazing at the female body. This reflects a gender stereotype (representation of gender and body) (Rose, 2001) that objectifies women through the male gaze. The female model, dressed in exotic attire and positioned between two men, is arranged compositionally (compositional modalities: spatial organization) (Rose, 2001) as their object of desire. Such representation stimulates the male audience’s sexual pleasure in two ways: first, by identifying with the male actors within the image, and second, through the act of looking itself. Even in the absence of a physical presence within the frame, the male viewer experiences a similar pleasure by visually consuming the image of the woman, his desired object.



Figure 6. Love Talc Advertisement (Source: *Shaptahik Bichitra*, 1996)

However, this issue becomes more complex when the male gaze is imposed on both men and women through media representation. The objectification of the female body serves not only as a source of visual pleasure for the “male gaze” but also reflects women’s internalized desire to be looked at (Mulvey, 1975). This reflects a narcissistic desire, rooted in scopophilia, that fuels an unrealistic longing to attain the rare or idealized beauty.

For instance, Figure 6 portrays a slim female body (representation of the body) (Rose, 2001) who is desirable for her revealing Western appearance (representation of props), drawing the attention of two men. Such beauty was considered rare in the nineties, as a tall and slim female body in a revealing Western dress was uncommon in Bangladeshi culture. The Western media of that era helped establish these beauty standards, which gradually influenced Bangladeshi media

and shaped how some Muslim women came to view themselves. Yet, this Westernized image of beauty was inaccessible to most women due to social and religious constraints. Only elite and upper-middle-class women could follow these trends, while the majority were left categorized as undesirable.

This visual projection implies the issues related to “social modality”, particularly class and economy (Rose, 2001). If not directly, the focus of this image suggests desirability in Western clothing. This marks the beginning of Western influence on the Bengali identity of Muslim women, where the female figure remains passive and continues to serve the male gaze.

Elite women could identify with this image of desirability and sought to replicate it in their own appearances, while lower-middle-class women struggled to do so. When beauty standards are unattainable, they can negatively impact the self-confidence among the masses, ultimately benefiting the beauty industry (Cortese, 2008). That is why these beauty products were sold more in rural areas, where lower and middle-class women felt more inferiority toward Westernized representations. These groups often fell into what Baudrillard (1998) describes as “salvation by consumption,” which suggests the need to prove oneself through objects. As their status by birth fostered a sense of inferiority in their unconscious, they seek validation through consumption. To attain a higher social status and rare beauty, many lower and middle-class women bought products associated with the elite lifestyle depicted in advertisements.

This sense of inferiority among the lower and middle classes also contributed to the association of Western ideas with non-Muslim values in 1990s Bangladesh. Western attire, often used to glorify female skin and body shape in visual media, became a symbol of modernity and class distinction. While some viewed Western clothing as a marker of upper-class and non-Muslim identity, others began to see traditional Bengali attire as outdated or non-trendy. As a result, a visible class-based division emerged, complicating the identity formation of Muslim women.

For the last fifty years, the USA has openly sexualized female bodies in visual media to increase consumerism (Kumar, 2017). This trend has shaped the global advertising norms, reinforcing expectations of objectified female appearance even in men’s products, such as men’s perfume, shaving kits, or electronics. Some Western car advertisements, such as those by Nissan, have been criticized for objectifying women and offending feminist sentiments in the West (Kumar, 2017). Similarly, in Bangladesh, this tactic is employed to promote motorbike sales (see Figure 7). In such advertisements, Western-style female clothing (representation of looks and props) symbolized modernity—a deeply rooted idea in the 1990s.

The motorbike placed in front of the female model (compositional modalities: spatial organization) (Rose 2001) enhances the product’s appeal. This representation of props and appearances implies that a man who rides the bike can also enjoy the pleasure of female companionship associated with it. However, although these Bangladeshi ads mirrored Western patterns of positioning the female body to attract male consumers, the women’s clothing remained relatively modest.



Figure 7. Honda Advertisement (Source: *Shaptahik Bichitra*, 1990)

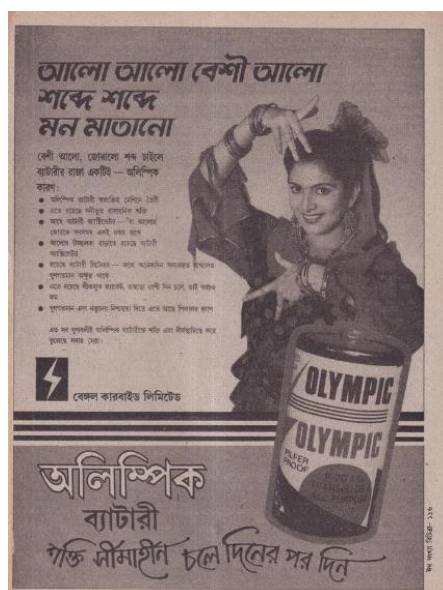


Figure 8. Olympic Battery Advertisement (Source: *Shaptahik Bichitra*, 1993)

Similarly, Figure 8 illustrates this strategy of highlighting a female appearance to increase the market appeal of Olympic batteries. This visual emphasis not only increases product sales but also turns the female body into an object of male consumption (Luo, 2022). The purpose of positioning a female body in print or visual media is therefore evident: by exploiting the female body, the advertising industry profits from products primarily targeted at men. As Gill (2008) mentions, “instead of caring or nurturing or motherhood (all of course highly problematic and exclusionary), it is now possession of a ‘sexy body’ that is presented as women’s key source of identity”. Here, the female model is projected as a dancer or entertainer wearing a fusion of Western and South Asian attire (see Figure 8). Her outfit resembles a traditional sari but is designed in a distinctly Western style (representation of looks) (Rose, 2001). The inclusion of traditional jewellery: bangles, earrings, and a necklace (representation of props), retains a sense of cultural authenticity, while the overall costume challenges conventional Bengali norms.

Although both Figures 7 and 8 position women for male objectification, their representations remain relatively modest, with the models’ bodies covered by full/half sleeves and pants. This choice of attire reflects the content creators’ sensitivity to the religious sentiments of the general population and the political authority of the time. Consequently, a visual fusion of Western and South Asian aesthetics became a trend, allowing advertisements to appear modern while maintaining cultural and religious acceptability. Because this fusion offered full body coverage, it also became a more attainable fashion ideal for middle-class women.

1.3 Modernization and Globalization: (2000 to Present)

At the beginning of the 21st century, Bangladeshi youth were introduced to new forms of media and, eventually, social media. This new era started to break the stereotypical portrayals of Bangladeshi Muslim women that had previously projected them as either submissive or as mere objects of male pleasure. Due to globalization and growing feminist awareness among the new generation, such objectification is now ethically questioned. What was once effective through the sexist portrayal of women may no longer resonate in today’s advertising climate, as audiences have become more socially and morally conscious (Kumar, 2017). With the rise of ethical consumers, the advertising industry has become more aware of the consequences of gender stereotyping in visual media. Consequently, this new era marks the beginning of more diverse portrayals of women in media. These representations often combine elements of Western, traditional Bengali, and religious attire, reflecting the pseudo-religious identity of contemporary Bangladeshi Muslim women who wish to appear modern, fashionable, timely, and religious simultaneously.

Furthermore, Bangladeshi advertisements have begun reshaping the global image of Muslim women, while the Western world has often expected to see Muslim women veiled and living under the misogynistic patriarchal rule. As Ahmed (2006) states, Western media represent Muslim women as exotic desirable beings who always wear veils. Such portrayals fuel patriarchal fantasies that fetishize veiled Muslim women and associate them with both submission and extremism (implying terrorism). In contrast, Bangladeshi advertisements showcasing veiled women as empowered, independent individuals offer a counter-narrative that can change global perceptions of Muslim women. However, despite this progressive shift, underlying class division and traditional gender roles remain unchanged.

Interestingly, Bangladeshi culture, being more diverse and inclusive, showcases both traditional and Westernized

women within the same visual frame, promoting a positive image of female empowerment (compositional modality: spatial organization) (Rose, 2001). For example, a recent “bKash” advertisement positions Nishat from Dhaka, dressed in Western clothing, on the left, and Sultana from Jessore, in traditional clothing with a veil, on the right. While Nishat represents urban women in the retail industry, Sultana represents rural traditional roles tied to tailoring and dressmaking (social modality: class and economy) (Rose, 2001). At first glance, this composition appears inclusive as it visually unites urban and rural women in both modernized and traditional settings. However, a closer look at the costumes and props (representation of props) (Rose, 2001) reveals deeper social meanings, indicating that empowerment is still shaped by class and appearance rather than true gender equality.



Figure 9. bKash Advertisement (Source: *bKash Limited Facebook Page*, March 2019)

Stuart Hall (1977) explains that meaning is constructed not only through the image but also through objects (clothes) that function as signifiers. In this advertisement, two women are positioned in the same frame to show a binary construct: urban versus rural women. Nishat, dressed in a white suit and a blue shirt with a measuring tape around her neck (signifier; representation of props) (Rose, 2001), generates a “mental concept” (signified) (Hall, 1977). Her formal, Western-style clothing conveys progress and empowerment, aligning with the ideology of a modern Bangladesh. However, the measuring tape signifies her occupation in the retail industry, suggesting that she works for minimum wage rather than holding a leadership position, even as an educated modern woman. On the contrary, Sultana, wearing a veil and colorful sari, represents the stereotypical image of rural women (social modalities: class and economy) (Rose, 2001). Her sewing machine (signifier) evokes an impression of poverty (signified) (Hall, 1977), reinforcing the class dimension of this visual binary.

Both women are portrayed in a way that allows consumers to identify with them, as money transaction apps like this one must appeal to a broad customer base. The content creators deliberately selected one urban and one rural woman to align with the expectations of ethically conscious consumers. Nevertheless, this can be read as a form of “tokenism”, strategically including individuals from the underprivileged community to satisfy moral expectations without addressing systemic inequalities (Grant, 2017). This strategy of limited diversity gives an illusion of national progress and women's empowerment across sectors, while patriarchal and class hierarchies remain intact. Ultimately, such portrayals reinforce the patriarchal system by presenting women as visible participants in the workforce without allowing them true authority or leadership.

In recent years, the trend of wearing the hijab with Western clothing has become common among urban Muslim women in Bangladesh (see Figure 10). This hybrid style allows women to maintain religious modesty by covering their hair while simultaneously participating in global fashion trends. However, the stereotypical projection of designated gender roles in advertisements continue to constrain women's identity. Figure 10, for instance, highlights a woman buying groceries in a store (representation of activities) (Rose, 2001), which implies her domestic responsibility and care for her family. While this image projects a liberated Muslim woman stepping out in public, it simultaneously reinforces patriarchal expectations that restrict her identity within the boundaries of household duties.

However, some recent representations in Bangladeshi media offer a more empowering image of Muslim women by prioritizing their personal choices. Figure 11 captioned: “My Hijab, My Choice,” exemplifies this shift, highlighting the woman's autonomy in choosing to wear the hijab (representation of props) (Rose, 2001). This representation suggests that her decision is not a sign of submission to patriarchal religious norms but rather an expression of liberation through her religious practice of wearing hijab.



Figure 10. AMEX Card Advertisement (Source: *City Bank Facebook Page*, March 2024)

In contrast, the Western gaze frequently misrepresents veiled Muslim women as oppressed, interpreting the hijab or burqa as symbols of subjugation rather than empowerment. A Muslim woman wearing a veil is often associated with the backwardness of medieval Islamic practices, viewed as incompatible with Western ideals of modernity and progress (Said, 1978). Such perceptions vilify Muslim women's choices as the Western world links them with the anti-empowerment movement.



Figure 11. Clear Hijab Pure Advertisement (Source: *Clear Facebook Page*, August 2020)



Figure 12. Sunsilk Hijab Refresh Shampoo Advertisement (Source: *Sunsilk Facebook Page*, June 2018)

The Western world often fails to recognize cultural differences and continues to perceive Muslim women as the “oppressed other”—especially those who wear the hijab—in contrast to the supposedly liberated Western woman (Ahmed, 2006). Historically, however, the Western world has denied autonomous voices of women within unequal social structures (Gill, 2008). Women were first objectified as sexual commodities and later empowered through hypersexualized images in advertisements that demonstrate how “to bring men to their knees” (Gill, 2008). In this light, the Western idea of female liberation often contradicts itself, as it undermines the choices of Muslim women who choose modesty and reject sexual objectification.

Recent representations in Bangladeshi media challenge this Western misconception by depicting confident, empowered Muslim women who wear the hijab on their own terms (see Figures 11 and 12). Figure 12 highlights the “representation of activities” (Rose, 2001) by projecting a hijab-wearing woman practicing karate, suggesting that she challenges the stereotypical notion of Muslim women as confined or passive. Influenced by global media exposure, many Muslim women in Bangladesh have adopted a blend of global fashion trends and religious attire, demonstrating that faith and modernity can coexist. Their sense of empowerment comes from within, rooted in the prioritization of inner beauty over the external objectification of the body. This positions Muslim women in contrast to Western ideals of liberation, which often emphasize visibility and sexual expression.

Bangladeshi culture, though more inclusive in embracing both hijabi and non-hijabi women, continues to be shaped by patriarchal norms that seek to regulate women’s choices. While wearing a burqa is not mandatory for a woman in contemporary Bangladesh, their freedom remains conditional—granted only as long as they conform to traditional gender expectations (Ahmed, 2006). Thus, despite the empowered image of Muslim women in visual media, their lived experiences continue to be constrained and conditioned by patriarchy. As long as women’s autonomy is measured by how well it aligns with patriarchal interests, their freedom will be unquestioned. The underlying misogynistic judgments of society will continue to dictate how a woman should behave, speak, and dress—reminding her that even her freedom exists within boundaries defined by patriarchy.

6. Conclusion

This research highlights the convoluted identity formation of Muslim women in Bangladesh and demonstrates how these shifts are reflected in visual media representations. Since independence in 1971, advertisements have played a significant role in constructing and reshaping women’s identities through changing beauty standards and gender expectations. In the immediate post-independence period, the media initially celebrated a traditional Bengali identity. However, shifting political ideologies and the influence of globalization have since produced a more hybrid and multifaceted identity for Bangladeshi Muslim women. These evolving identities are evident in their changing clothing patterns, gender roles, and class expressions from the 1970s onward. Over time, the interplay between religion, culture, politics, and global trends has constructed an image of the Muslim woman who is constantly negotiating between modernity and tradition.

Although contemporary Bangladeshi media often portray Muslim women as empowered and independent, these representations can obscure the continued influence of patriarchal norms. Women’s empowerment is frequently expressed through symbolic or tokenistic images that tend to reinforce existing social expectations rather than challenge them. Ultimately, Bangladeshi visual media reflects an ongoing struggle between autonomy and conformity, revealing how Muslim women’s identities continue to evolve within the structures of faith, culture, and gendered power dynamics.

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