The politics of biopics: Analyzing propaganda films in Bangladesh's political context

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ACADEMIC ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the use of state-funded cinema as a vehicle for political propaganda in contemporary Bangladesh by analyzing two government-funded films: *Hasina: A Daughter's Tale* (2018) and *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* (2023). The former is a docudrama centered on the personal and political life of Bangladesh's former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, narrated by Hasina herself, while the latter is a fictional biopic of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the nation's founding leader and Hasina's father. Notably, both films were released in close proximity to the national elections of 2018 and 2024, respectively. Employing a modified ideological criticism as a methodological framework, this study examines narratives and character portrayals to assess how dominant ideologies are constructed and circulated through these cinematic texts. The analysis aims to uncover the films' functions as propaganda in reinforcing political narratives to legitimize the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) regime's hold on state power, thereby contributing to broader discussions on the intersections of media, ideology, and political propaganda in South Asia.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how two recent government-funded films in Bangladesh may have been used as tools of political propaganda. The films -- *Hasina: A Daughter's Tale* (2018), which tells the story of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in her own words, and *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* (2023), a dramatized biography of her father and Bangladesh's founding leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman -- were released just before national elections. By analyzing how these films portray their main characters and the country's history, the study explores whether they were designed to promote the ruling party, the Bangladesh Awami League. This research helps us understand how films are used as propaganda tools to strengthen the legitimacy of those in power.

Dedicated to

Shaheed Kamal Khan

Any father who patiently encourages his 7-year-old to read more non-fiction is undoubtedly a great one

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On June 5, 2024, Bangladesh's High Court ruled that the government's 2018 decision to abolish the 30% job quota for the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters from the country's 1971 War of Independence, was unlawful. The government's 2018 decision was made following two months of intense protests by university students and job seekers who viewed the quota system as discriminatory. However, this 2018 decision was challenged in 2024 by families of freedom fighters as they thought it to be their "vested" right to have the quotas as descendants of freedom fighters (The Daily Star, 2024).

The High Court rule essentially restored the quota system in government and civil services jobs in Bangladesh. Preference for 56% of government posts was given to candidates from various quotas. Of these positions, 30% were allocated to children and grandchildren of the 1971 freedom fighters; 10% went to women; 10% went to residents from underdeveloped or remote areas; 5% were reserved for indigenous communities; and 1% was allocated for persons with disabilities. (The Daily Star, 2024). In the immediate aftermath, six universities saw a surge in student protests under the banner "Students Against Discrimination". In another verdict on July 4, The Supreme Court's Appellate Division decided to uphold the June 5 High Court decision. This prompted the student protesters to organize a countrywide shutdown, known as the "Bangla Blockade", starting the following day on July 6 (The Daily Star, 2024).

Amid the ongoing protests and back-and-forth legal proceedings surrounding the issue, former prime minister Sheikh Hasina resorted to the politics of labeling, where anyone critical of the ruling party and its actions was identified as an "anti-national" (Khandoker, 2024). She controversially compared the protesters to "*razakars*," a disparaging term used to identify the collaborators of the invading Pakistani Army in Bangladesh's 1971 War of Independence, in

answer to a reporter's question during a press conference (The Daily Star, 2024). Her statement portrayed the protesters as an “anti-national” force. It also created a stir and sparked many protests across different universities, with students chanting *"Tumi ke? Ami ke? Razakar, Razakar! Ke boleche, ke boleche? Shirochar, shoirachar!"* [Who are you? Who am I? Razakar, Razakar! Who said so? Who said so? Autocrat, autocrat!]

Khandoker (2024) hints at the BAL regime’s reliance on the quota system as a way of installing people loyal to their party in important decision-making roles in the government and civil administration instead of selecting candidates through a more merit-based approach:

> “The recent quota movement in Bangladesh, which evolved into an anti-government revolutionary force, gained significant momentum by challenging the fascist manipulation of the terms *razakar* and *muktijoddha* [freedom fighters]. While the term *muktijoddha* has been associated with honor, bravery, and national liberation, symbolizing the highest moral ground in the country’s history, the Awami League has distorted this term, using it in the quota system to reward those loyal to the regime rather than those truly deserving… When Hasina attempted to discredit their legitimate demands and portray them as enemies of the state, instead of succumbing to this insult, the protesters responded with a powerful act of defiance: they sarcastically and defiantly embraced the label of *razakar*, exposing how the regime uses such terms to stifle any form of dissent or criticism.”

However, the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) once again capitalized on the students’ chants, using them as a reason to mobilize activists from the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL)—the student wing of the ruling party. BAL instructed members of various BCL college and university units to respond to the protesters (The Daily Star, 2024). What ensued was a

fortnight of violence against unarmed protesters, police brutality, mass arrests, block raids, internet shutdown, curfews, and absolute mayhem (The Great Wave, 2024). Although the government issued a circular on July 23, reforming the quota system that permits merit-based hiring for 93% of positions in government, semi-government, and autonomous organizations (The Daily Star, 2024), representatives from "Students Against Discrimination" refused to leave the streets and demanded justice for the people killed and injured during the demonstrations. According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights estimates, some 650 people were killed between July 16 and August 11. Approximately 250 people were confirmed to be dead after the latest wave of protests on August 5–6, while approximately 400 deaths were reported between July 16 and August 4 (OHCHR, 2024). It was the sheer brutality and mishandling of a student movement that led people from all walks of life to resist and protest, asking for Hasina's resignation. On August 5, 2024, she was compelled to resign as the longest-serving prime minister of Bangladesh, after four consecutive terms, in the face of a mass uprising that she and all her forces combined did not know how to muzzle.

It took several arguably rigged elections, extreme censorship of media, and the subsequent culture of fear of persecution for Sheikh Hasina to hold office for almost 16 consecutive years despite the widespread corruption and gross violations of human rights during her tenure. The people of the country were being lied to with made-up statistics on economic development, and big-budget development projects were being used as distractions (Mustafa, 2024).

However, it's not just the recent "achievements" that the Hasina government focused on to claim legitimacy for their government. In Bangladesh, attempts have been made to alter the historical narrative with each change of government, especially about the events of 1971 (Paul,

2024), when Bangladesh came into being as an independent nation-state following a genocide of its people by the Pakistan military and a nine-month-long war of independence (Mascarenhas, 1971; Payne, 1973; Shafique, 1997). This trend of altering the historical narrative about the independence of the country accelerated throughout the BAL's protracted rule, as political pressure caused history to become more and more skewed towards highlighting the contribution of BAL, particularly its former head Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of the nation, who was Sheikh Hasina's father. To justify the party's stronghold on power, the 1971 narrative was condensed to fit its viewpoint (Paul, 2024). This was being done on multiple fronts, through legislative processes, academic curriculum, mass media, and cinema as well. Journalist Priyam Paul (2024) writes, "Didn't the prolonged rule of the Awami League aim to elevate one great man, thereby creating a barren narrative of uniformity about the 1971 war? The practice of using wisdom and remaining faithful to the truth is vital for documenting the history of the Liberation War, even if that truth is melancholic and uncomfortable. Sadly, these qualities were notably absent in the Awami League's partisan narrative of 1971."

The tools employed to promote and propagate BAL's partisan narrative of 1971 and subsequent events, as Paul (2024) puts it, offer a lens through which we can explore the broader dynamics of political messaging and manipulation. In the post-BAL era, these tools, such as textbooks, personal testimony, and autobiographical works including films, can work as important artifacts in depicting the country's history and how it has been manipulated over time. They provide us a nuanced perspective regarding their significance in shaping the nation's identity.

This thesis analyzes two government-funded films – *Hasina: A Daughter's Tale* (2018), a docudrama based on Sheikh Hasina's personal and political life and *Mujib: The Making of a*

Nation (2023), a fictional biopic of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The thesis analyzes their role as political propaganda tools through an ideological critique of the narratives (Foss, 2018) and portrayals of the central characters in the two films.

The thesis focuses on the aforementioned films because they are high-quality, influential productions and particularly because of the time in which they were released. Both films were released months before two consecutive general elections held respectively in 2018 and 2024. The thesis aims to uncover how these films functioned as propaganda tools, by examining the dominant narratives and ideologies portrayed in them as well as if, and how, they contributed to the BAL regime's stronghold on state power through a retelling of Bangladesh's history. The thesis also aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the dominant ideologies portrayed in the films?

RQ2: How did they contribute to the BAL regime's stronghold on power?

The novelty of this thesis lies in the fact that it provides a unique geopolitical perspective on propaganda, particularly on propaganda films, from the viewpoint of events and productions in recent history. It also explores the multiple nuances of diverse narratives of a country's history, which has found itself on the brink of erasure innumerable times.

The thesis proceeds with a literature review that covers the political history of Bangladesh, scholarship on propaganda, and studies on ideology. It then outlines the thesis method, which is ideological critique. The analysis, discussion of the findings, and the conclusion sections follow.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Bangladesh: A Political History

The Inception of Awami League (1906-1957)

The history of Bangladesh and how it came into being as an independent nation-state is intertwined with the history of Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) as a political party. On December 30, 1906, when the greater Indian sub-continent was still a British colony, the *"Nikhil Pakistan Muslim League"* (All Pakistan Muslim League) was founded in Dhaka, the capital of present-day Bangladesh, for the politically conscious Muslim population. In 1907, Nawab Salimullah became its president, while Justice Jahid Hossain and Nawab Ali Chowdhury became the joint secretaries (Rahim, 1976). In 1937, popular politician AK Fazlul Haque – who was given the title *"Sher-e-Bangla"* (the Tiger of Bengal) – joined his *"Krishak Praja Party"* with the Muslim League to form a coalition. Another notable politician, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, was made the general secretary of the coalition (Ahmad, 2002).

Ten years later, in 1947, the Partition of India happened. It brought about a shift in political boundaries as well as the distribution of other resources. The collapse of the British Raj in the Indian subcontinent and the establishment of two sovereign nations in South Asia—India and Pakistan (Fisher, 2018) were profound changes. One significant aspect of the political boundary shift was the separation of British India's Bengal and Punjab provinces. India was given the majority of the non-Muslim districts in these provinces, whereas Pakistan was given the majority of the Muslim districts (Talbot and Singh, 2009).

The province of East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) became part of the newly formed Pakistan state. There was a vast geographical distance – the entire dominion of India – between

East Bengal and the entire west wing of Pakistan. But it was not just the geographical distance that set them apart, it was also the cultural and economic issues that created a rift between the two parts of Pakistan from the very beginning (Macarenhas, 1971; Sobhan, 1971). Sobhan (1971) writes, “Bengal's political partnership with West Pakistan was on an ideological basis — in protest and self-defense against the exploitation by the religious majority [the Hindus] of British India. One never thought that this would turn into an economic exploitation by a more developed West Pakistan.”

From the very beginning, the eastern wing felt as if they were being treated like an internal “colony” of West Pakistan (Ahmed, 2016; Mascarenhas, 1971). According to Mascarenhas (1971), “the Bengali sensitivity about the "colonialism" of West Pakistan is grounded on four major points of discontent: denial of their full role in the decision-making process; denial for many years of a national status for the Bengali language; the absurd denigration of the piety of the Muslims in, the east wing by those in the west; and the economic disparities which amounted to strangulation” (p.9). Right after the partition in August 1947, an alliance of Bengali politicians and intellectuals called *“Tamuddin Majlis*” came into being on September 1, 1947, to press demands for two state languages in Pakistan – Bangla and Urdu (Ahad, 1982). A month later, the *“Rashtrabhasha Sangram Parishad”* (National Action Committee for Language) was convened (Al Helal, 2003).

The first blow came on Bangla, the language spoken by the majority in East Bengal and 56% of the entire population of the dominion of Pakistan: Pakistan’s founding father Mohammad Ali Jinnah firmly stated that "Urdu and Urdu alone" would be Pakistan's official language on his only trip to East Bengal in February 1948. This emphasis on Urdu was made although millions of Bengalis and more than 90% of the population, who lived in other provinces of West Pakistan,

did not speak the language (Mascarenhas, 1971). This declaration not only had cultural but also economic implications, as prominent Bengali politicians like Abul Mansur Ahmed pointed out that Urdu becoming Pakistan's state language would make the educated Bengalis "ineligible" for government positions (Umar, 1979).

Amid such developments, on January 4, 1948, the student wing of the Muslim League came into being in the form of the "East Pakistan Muslim Chhatra League", where Sheikh Mujibur Rahman played a key role as a student at Dhaka University (Ahmed, 2016). In 1949, the Muslim League was divided due to internal disagreements between two factions of the party, and the Awami (people's) Muslim League was born (Ahad, 1982). Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became a key organizer of the newly formed party, and at the age of 32, became the heart of the party through sheer hard work and impeccable social skills (Ahmed, 2016). However, Jinnah's declaration regarding the state language issue led to a firm resistance – particularly from the students in East Bengal – and subsequent arrests. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman also got the first of his many trips to prison during the Pakistan era at this time (Mascarenhas, 1971).

In 1952, the then-prime minister Nazimuddin again raised the state language issue and declared that Urdu would be the sole state language of Pakistan, to which the *Rashtrabhasha Sangram Parishad* retaliated with a protest on February 4, 1952 (Ahmed, 2016). Amid the growing tension, the provincial government imposed a curfew with Section 144, which protesting students defied on February 21 and 22, in Dhaka and nearby districts. Around 26 people died and 400 were injured by the shots fired by the police during peaceful processions (Khan, 2009).

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was in prison at that time, and it was during his time in prison that he was made the acting general secretary of Awami Muslim League in 1953, widely referred

to as Awami League then. Prominent politician Mawlana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani became the president of the party. The demands for regional autonomy for East Bengal started gaining momentum. The political landscape also became tumultuous with the subsequent provincial election and dissolution of the government in 1954. (Ahmed, 2016). Meanwhile, the disparity between the economies of the two wings in Pakistan became even more evident, with only 20% of development funds going to East Pakistan in 1950–55, whereas 80% went to West Pakistan (Mascarenhas, 1971; Sobhan, 1971).

In 1955, the newly formulated constitution of Pakistan recognized East Bengal as East Pakistan. In 1956, Bangla was made a state language along with Urdu, and with provincial governor Iskandar Mirza's mediation, the Awami League formed the provincial government with a 13-member cabinet. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was gaining even more influence not only within the party but also in the newly formed provincial government. However, in 1957, the Awami League saw yet another rift within the party, caused by a disagreement between Suhrawardy and Bhasani regarding foreign policy, causing Bhasani to leave the party and form his own National Awami Party (NAP) (Ahmed, 2016).

Martial Law and the Ayub Khan Era (1958-1969)

In 1958, General Mohammad Ayub Khan, commander-in-chief of the Pakistan Army, seized power through the first military coup in Pakistan and ousted Prime Minister Feroze Khan Noon's government. Overthrowing the 1956 constitution (Sayeed, 2022; Mukherjee, 2016), he imposed martial law and became the chief martial law administrator, ensuing a period of media censorship and crackdown on political parties. On October 12, 1958, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested on charges of corruption, along with other prominent politicians in the region, and sentenced to two years in prison with a fine. In 1962, several political parties in East Pakistan,

including the Awami League and Bhasani's NAP, formed an anti-Ayub alliance called the National Democratic Party (NDP) (Ahmed, 2016).

Following the death of Suhrawardy in 1963, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became the general secretary of the Awami League and started pressing demands for greater regional autonomy for East Pakistan. In 1966 he became the president of the party, while Tajuddin Ahmed succeeded him as the general secretary and became his right-hand man. Rahman launched and led the six-point demand on behalf of the Awami League, drafted by prominent academicians like Rehman Sobhan, Nurul Islam, Khairul Kabir, Anisur Rahman, Muzaffar Ahmed Chowdhury, and Khan Sarwar Murshid (Sobhan, 2016), asking for separate convertible currencies, reserve bank, taxation system, and military or paramilitary forces for East and West Pakistan (Ahmed, 2016; Mascarenhas, 1971; Sobhan, 2016).

Suhrawardy's death created a brief power vacuum which was quickly filled by Rahman. He gained credibility as the leader of the entire East Pakistan and was awarded the title of *Bangabandhu* (friend of Bengal) for his grit, determination, and eloquence (Baxter, Malik, and Kennedy, 1988; Ahmed, 2016). However, his increasing popularity led to his arrest again, and it was during his time in solitary confinement that he was charged with sedition in the Agartala Conspiracy Case (Ahmed, 2016; Shafique, 1997). A mass uprising followed, leading to multiple deaths of people protesting Ayub Khan's rule, which eventually led to his resignation as the chief martial law administrator in 1969. He was succeeded by General Yahya Khan, who arranged for a general election in the following year (Ahmed, 2016).

The Birth of Bangladesh: Events Preceding and Succeeding the 1970 Elections

Despite the central government's several promises, East Pakistan only received 35% of development expenditures in 1965–1970, while 65% went to West Pakistan. Between 40 and 50% of all exports from West Pakistan have recently been sold to an East Pakistani captive market. According to the open market exchange rate, the entire amount of resources transferred in this way throughout the 20 years ending in 1968–1969 was calculated to be Rs. 31 million, or USD 2,100 million at the open market exchange rate (Mascarenhas, 1971; Sobhan, 1971). The unequal distribution of revenue and foreign exchange between East and West Pakistan soured relations between the two regions from the start (Meher, 2015). The Bengali leadership criticized the central government's policies on import licensing and foreign exchange allocation, arguing that "what was earned in East Pakistan was spent in West Pakistan" (Zaheer, 1994, p.51).

Against this backdrop, the general elections were held on December 7, 1970. The Awami League won 167 out of 169 seats belonging to East Pakistan in the National Assembly of Pakistan, as well as a landslide in the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) placed second with 86 seats. (Kaushik and Patanayak, 1995; Guhathakurata and Schendel, 2003).

However, a political crisis emerged when PPP leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto declared that his party would boycott parliament if Rahman formed the next government, as they were vehemently opposed to the six-point demand in the Awami League's electoral manifesto that guaranteed greater regional autonomy for East Pakistan (Hossain, 2013; Jalal, 2014; Sobhan, 2015). Both Bhutto and Yahya Khan traveled to Dhaka for negotiations with the Awami League, to forestall the formation of the government and a new constitution rooted in the six-point demand that won the Awami League the general elections (Mascarenhas, 1971; Hossain, 2013).

The negotiations went on regarding the conditions for the formation of a government, where Sheikh Mujibur Rahman remained adamant about implementing the six points. However, with time, it started to become clearer that the West was not keen on letting the Awami League form the government. The people of East Pakistan were gearing up for the final call for independence from West Pakistan from their undisputed leader. On March 7, 1971, hundreds and thousands of people gathered at the Racecourse ground in Dhaka in an assembly called by the Awami League, to hear Rahman speak. However, as Mascarenhas (1971) writes, “Much to the dismay of people gathered on the racecourse ground, the much-desired declaration was never made. Instead, Sheikh Mujib launched a civil disobedience movement "to achieve self-determination." However crippling and distasteful the movement became to the Yahya Khan regime; it did give it the desired time for the military build-up” (p. 78).

While Mujib did not declare outright independence, he did emphasize that the Awami League's goal would be to achieve independence eventually. He stated that the Awami League would collect taxes and form committees in each community to mobilize resistance. In what came to be the most iconic speech in the history of Bangladesh’s politics, Rahman proclaimed, “This struggle is the struggle for our freedom. This struggle is the struggle for our independence” (Sen Gupta, 1974).

Following the speech, seventeen days of civil disobedience spread throughout East Pakistan (Kaushik and Patanayak, 1995). Meanwhile, West Pakistani troops were transferred into the eastern wing via PIA aircraft, while armaments were unloaded from Pakistan Navy ships in the port city of Chittagong’s harbor. The Pakistani military was gearing up for a crackdown (Hamid, 2019; Mascarenhas, 1971; Payne, 1973).

General Yahya Khan and PPP leader Bhutto left the negotiations halfway and went to West Pakistan on March 25, 1971. On the same night, the Pakistan military launched Operation Searchlight to crush East Pakistan's spirit of resistance. In the first hour of Operation Searchlight, Rahman made the final call for independence and made the arrangements to send a recording of the proclamation to Awami League leader MA Hannan in Chittagong for dissemination (Mascarenhas, 1971; Payne, 1973; Mukul, 1993). Payne (1973) writes,

> "He [Rahman] dictated to a friend in the Central Telegraph Office the following short message to be sent down all wires. 'The Pakistani Army has attacked police lines at Rajar Bagh and East Pakistan Rifles headquarters at Pilkhana at midnight. Gather strength to resist and prepare for a war of independence'… The military had made the first of their irretrievable mistakes: they had attacked the university [Dhaka University, the heart of the student movements against the Pakistan regime] and the police before seizing the telephone exchange. "Gather strength to resist and prepare for a war of independence" was the most fateful sentence he [Rahman] had ever spoken. It was also the most dangerous, for as soon as it became known to the military authorities, they would have cause to arrest him for high treason" (p. 24).

What followed was nine months of genocide by the Pakistan military (Mascarenhas, 1971; Payne, 1973; Shafique, 1997; Bass, 2013). Shortly after declaring the independence of Bangladesh, Mujib was arrested without charges and flown to a prison in West Pakistan after midnight, where he remained in solitary confinement for the entirety of the war, while his family was kept under house arrest. Meanwhile, many other League leaders escaped to India. Tajuddin Ahmed met with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and formed the wartime provisional government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh on April 17, 1971, in the Chuadanga district

inside the Bangladesh territory (Hasan, Mirza, Khondaker, 2009; Ahsan, 2018; Samad, 2021). A major insurgency led by the Mukti Bahini, guerilla warfare units consisting of the Bengali army, police officers, and civilians arose across East Pakistan. Following Indian intervention in December, the Pakistan Army surrendered to the allied forces of Bangladesh and India on December 16, 1971. (Payne, 1973; Shafique, 1997; Hasan, Mirza, Khondaker, 2009). Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was released from military custody on January 8, 1972, and returned to an independent Bangladesh on January 10, 1972 (Gandhi, 1999). Upon returning, he briefly assumed the provisional presidency and later took office as the prime minister. Soon after, Rahman introduced a parliamentary republic through a presidential decree (Whiteboard, 2020).

Post-Independence Chaos: A Saga of Coups and Countercoups (1972-2007)

Rahman took the helm of a war-torn country and was faced with multifaceted challenges from all directions. The first national election of independent Bangladesh took place in 1973, which was controversial as news of opposition leaders being kidnapped by the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) activists and vote rigging kept surfacing (Lawal, 2024). BAL bagged a landslide victory by winning 293 constituencies out of 300 (Mascarenhas, 1986; Lawal, 2024). Leftist insurgent groups became more active following the devastating famine in 1974 (Mascarenhas, 1986; Ahamed, 2004; Fair and Ali, 2010). Meanwhile, Rahman's paramilitary force, called the Jatiya Rakkhibahini, rose to the occasion to tackle the crisis with full impunity against their mass violation of human rights, public harassment, and extrajudicial killings, much to the dismay of the Bangladesh Army and the citizens in general (Mascarenhas, 1986; Ahamed, 2004; Fair and Ali, 2010). Many of the collaborators of the Pakistan occupation forces during the 1971 war were reinstated in administrative positions by Rahman (Mascarenhas, 1971). Eventually, Rahman also contributed to the creation of the 16th division of freedom fighters

post-independence – consisting of Awami League members who did not fight the war but got recognition and consequent administrative advantages (Mascarenhas, 1986).

While these events contributed to the growing resentment among the public towards his regime, in 1974, Rahman changed the constitution, declared himself president, and moved towards a one-party autocratic state, where he declared *Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League* (Bangladesh Farmers Workers Peoples League, also known as BAKSAL) to be the only legal political party in the country (Mascarenhas, 1986; Ahmad, 2022; Lawal, 2024). In 1975, Rahman was assassinated in a military coup along with his entire family, except his two daughters who were abroad at that time. The coup was orchestrated by Major Farooq and Major Rashid of the Bangladesh Army, who installed BAL leader Khondaker Mushtaque Ahmed as president and Major General Ziaur Rahman (also known as Major Gen Zia) as the chief of army staff (Lifschultz and Bird, 1979; Mascarenhas, 1986). Following the coup, the Mushtaque administration passed the Indemnity Ordinance (Mascarenhas, 1986; Riaz, 2016) to ensure immunity for those involved in the coup by restricting any legal or military proceedings against them (The Bangladesh Gazette Extraordinary, 1975).

Followed by multiple countercoups caused by the vacuum of power in the immediate aftermath of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination, Ziaur Rahman gained de facto power as head of the government already under martial law imposed by the Mushtaq government, took over the presidency in 1977, and formed his own Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in 1978 (Mascarenhas, 1986; Ahmed, 2016).

While the Zia administration was successful in stabilizing the civilian forces, the army was still in a tumultuous situation. This chaos within the military resulted in multiple attempted coups, including the final one that led to the assassination of General Zia in 1981 (Mascarenhas,

1986; Ahmed, 2016; Mohaiemen, 2024). In 1982, General HM Ershad took over with yet another coup, resulting in a military dictatorship that lasted till 1990. Meanwhile, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's exiled daughter Sheikh Hasina returned to the country and took the helm of a disorganized BAL, while deceased General Zia's wife Khaleda Zia took over BNP. Together, they rallied against Ershad's dictatorship and following a mass uprising, he was compelled to step down. Between 1991 and 2008, the BNP got two terms under the premiership of Khaleda Zia, while BAL got one with Sheikh Hasina as prime minister. The rivalry between the two parties grew, resulting in further political instability, accusations of rigged elections, and political violence. These events eventually led to the 2008 elections, which saw the highest voter turnout in the history of independent Bangladesh (Lawal, 2024).

Political Landscape Post-2008 National Elections

The International Crime Tribunal, the Shabagh Movement, and the 2014 Elections

The Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) won the tenth national elections in 2008 as part of a larger alliance, securing 230 out of 300 constituencies alone, and 262 with the other parties in the coalition (Momen, 2009). As the head of BAL and the winning alliance, Sheikh Hasina became the prime minister and started her term in office in January 2009 (Tusher, 2009).

Establishing a tribunal to try individuals charged with war crimes was one of Sheikh Hasina's 2008 campaign promises. Restructuring the ICT Act of 1973 paved the way for the establishment of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT)-1 in 2010 and ICT-2 in 2012 (Zakaria, 2019). Till 2018, the tribunal had been trying 30 cases against suspected war criminals who worked with the invading Pakistani army, according to documents maintained by the prosecution team (Shaon, 2018). Most of the accused in cases filed by the tribunal were leaders and members

of Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist party notorious for its role as a collaborator of the Pakistan Army in the 1971 genocide (Rubin, 2010).

The tribunal was perhaps responsible for the first of the many youth-led movements during Hasina's 16-year regime. The Shahbagh Movement started when Abdul Quader Mollah, assistant secretary-general of Jamaat-e-Islami, was given a life sentence for the war crimes charges against him. Tahmima Anam (2013) writes, "When Mollah emerged from the courthouse, a group of online activists and bloggers assembled to protest against the verdict, demanding that Mollah...be given the death sentence. They set up camp in Shahbag, an intersection at the heart of Dhaka, near the university campus, and staged a small sit-in…Word spread on Facebook and Twitter. The next day, a few news channels began covering their protest. By the end of the week, they had managed to put together the biggest mass demonstration the country has seen in 20 years."

The Shahbagh movement exposed an interesting contradiction in the Bangladeshi psyche. As Anam (2013) describes,

> "For people like me who are opposed to capital punishment, Shahbag has posed an uncomfortable question: can a movement that began with a call for the death penalty, with cries of "*Fashi Chai! Fashi Chai!*" (Let him hang!) go beyond a simple baying for blood?... But the call for Mollah's death is about more than revenge…Since Bangladesh's independence, the state had done little to bring people such as Mollah to justice. The erasure of the war began in 1972 with the granting of amnesty to the Pakistani army officers who led the killings. During the decades of political turmoil that followed in Bangladesh, the war, and its crimes, were buried, while one regime after another contributed to the rehabilitation of the Jamaat party. Internationally, charges of genocide

were never formally brought to the United Nations. The world quickly forgot the Bangladesh war."

The Shahbagh movement was also an important event as it contributed to the secular vs Islamist or pro-liberation vs anti-liberation dichotomy. This dichotomy was later massively used by the BAL regime as a weapon for labeling and targeting groups and individuals with opposing views. Counterprotests by Jamaat-e-Islami activists following the subsequent verdicts by the ICT against their leaders led to violence and mayhem (Shaon, 2018). Another Islamist group, named "Hefazat-e-Islam" (Protector of Islam), marched to Dhaka with a brigade of madrassa (Islamic schools) students on May 5, 2013, with their 13-point demand, including "a ban on the public mixing of the sexes, criminal prosecution of atheists, and the imposition of the death penalty for blasphemy" (Human Rights Watch, 2013), three years after the High Court had ruled Bangladesh as now a secular state, following the automatic restoration of the original constitution by a Supreme Court judgment on the fifth amendment (The Daily Star, 2010). According to the human rights organization Odhikar, 61 people, including minors, were killed as a result of violent clashes and police brutality in the early hours of May 6 following the Hefazat rally, which was later covered up by pro-government influences in the media (Dhaka Tribune, 2024).

Amid all these protests and counter-protests, doubts began to emerge regarding the objectivity and transparency of the International Crime Tribunal. BAL took advantage of the situation and amended the International Criminal (Tribunals) Act of 1973 a few days after the demonstration started, 'allowing the government, the complainant or informant to appeal an order of acquittal or sentencing' (Roy, 2018). After the tribunal sentenced Jamaat leader Delawar Hossain Sayedee to death over war crime charges, violence, and mayhem erupted due to clashes between BAL and Jamaat-e-Islami activists, resulting in the death of 65 people. Saydee was later

given a life sentence following an appeal verdict (Shaon, 2018). The true intention and purpose of the Shahbagh movement were also being questioned, as Zakaria (2019) wrote, "...what was a people's movement at Shahbagh was soon hijacked by the Awami League, which centers its politics on being 'pro-liberation' and 'pro-justice'. 'The spontaneous movement, which began as a non-partisan platform, was appropriated by the party…" (p.275).

However, in 2011, a Nielsen 2-year study found that 36% of respondents rated the government favorably and 50% thought the nation was headed in the right direction (The Daily Star, 2011). It's amidst this political landscape that the eleventh national elections took place in 2014, held unilaterally without the presence of the opposition and 153 constituencies uncontested for the first time in the electoral history of Bangladesh. After her party won the 2008 elections under a caretaker government by a significant margin, Sheikh Hasina designed an electoral system without the interim caretaker government, removing actual electoral competition (Mustafa, 2024). The major opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) boycotted the elections after incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina refused to hold the elections under a neutral caretaker government (BBC, 2014). A crackdown on the opposition ensued, which continued till 2024 (Lawal, 2024). Before the elections on January 5, 2014, BNP leader Khaleda Zia was placed under house arrest for what she claimed as "baseless" corruption charges (Al Jazeera, 2018). There were numerous reports of violence against other opposition members (Lawal, 2024). BAL got a second term in the parliament with Sheikh Hasina as the prime minister, ensuing a decade of rigged elections, media censorship, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and corruption (Mustafa, 2024).

Scams, Corruption, and Foreign Policy.

Over the last fifteen years, scams involving Hall-Mark Group, Bismillah Group, Basic Bank, Janata Bank, Bangladesh Bank forex reserve theft, Farmers Bank, Islami Bank, and others have been revealed in a series of bank scams (Mustafa, 2023). It was estimated that BDT 92,261 crore (USD 7.6 billion as per the current exchange rate) was embezzled in 24 significant banking scams from 2008 to 2023 (The Daily Star, 2024). Moreover, there were BDT 22,481 crore (USD 1.9 billion as per the current exchange rate) in delinquent loans in the banking industry when the AL administration took office in 2009. By March 2024, this sum had grown eightfold in 15 years, to BDT 1,82,295 crore (USD 15 billion as per the current exchange rate) (Hossain, 2024).

The overall amount of defaulted loans, however, is BDT 4,39,689 crore (USD 36.216 billion as per the current exchange rate), or more than one-third of all loans in the banking industry, including the BDT 2,57,392 crore (USD 21.201 billion) in past-due loans that have been repeatedly rescheduled. Pro-government businesspeople profited through monopolistic syndicates, exploiting bank loans and channeling money abroad. With the complicity of bankers, bureaucrats, and political allies, they have acquired luxury properties in countries like Canada, the U.S., the U.K., Malaysia, and the UAE. (Mustafa, 2024).

During the early years of Hasina's rule, the nation also saw the largest stock market scandal. Following the scam in 2011, the investigation committee led by former Bangladesh Bank deputy governor Khondkar Ibrahim Khaled found 60 people responsible for the stock market scam, including powerful government figures like Salman F. Rahman, vice-chairman of the Beximco Group and Sheikh Hasina's investment adviser (Byron and Rahman, 2011). Through fraud and manipulation, at least Tk 100,000 crore (USD 8.237 billion) has been stolen from regular stock market investors in the nation over the past 15 years (Mustafa, 2024). Furthermore, between 2009 and 2018, on average, Bangladesh lost USD 8.27 billion (BDT

100,404 crore) a year because of trade mis-invoicing. This occurs when importers and exporters deliberately falsify the declared value of goods on invoices submitted to customs authorities. This allows traders to illegally move money across international borders, evade tax and/or customs duties, launder the proceeds of criminal activity, circumvent currency controls, and hide profits in offshore bank accounts, according to a report published by Global Financial Integrity (GFI), a US-based research organization (The Daily Star, 2021).

The energy sector was also marred with irregularities. The Quick Enhancement of Electricity and Energy Supply (Special Provision) Act, 2010 was passed by the former BAL government to safeguard the interests of numerous local and international corporate groupings. It also shielded the government from legal prosecution for its energy-related acts. Consequently, the public and private sectors obtained foreign loans for the construction of power plants, privately owned power plants were built one after the other with the promise of paying capacity charges, and costly coal and LNG were imported without any efforts to increase the capacity of renewable energy sources or extract domestic gas. Over the past 14 years, capacity charges have cost Bangladesh more than Tk 100,000 crore (USD 8.237 billion). The government borrowed $1.98 billion (BDT 24,039 crore) (Sajid and Kashem, 2022) for the coal-based Payra power plant, USD 1.6 billion (BDT 19,425 crore) (Khan, 2016) for the Rampal coal-fired power plant, $4.4 billion (BDT 53,419 crore) (Khan, 2014) for the Matarbari project, and $11.38 billion (BDT 138,162 crore) from Russia for the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant (The Daily Star, 2016). Due to the rising expenses and massive debt payments in the power and energy industry, customers had to bear the consequences of periodic increases in the costs of gas, electricity, and fuel oil. Retail electricity rates have climbed 14 times over the last 15 years, while wholesale prices have increased 12 times (Mustafa, 2024).

Meanwhile, the nation's foreign debt doubled from $24.21 billion (BDT 293,927 crore) (Bangladesh Bank, 2009) to nearly $100 billion (BDT 12,14,074 crore) (Mustafa, 2024) between 2009 and 2023. Inequality was on the rise, with the wealthiest five percent of the country having 30.04 percent of the country's total income, while the share of the poorest five percent in the income was only 0.37 percent, according to a 2022 survey report by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). The market for essential commodities was dominated by a select few companies, causing an unprecedented level of price hikes, which was coupled with issues like increased joblessness and extreme labor exploitation. Survey data was regularly manipulated by the government and associated agencies to paint a false picture of economic development (Mustafa, 2024).

The judiciary system was on the verge of ruin as well during Hasina's tenure. UN experts claim that during Sheikh Hasina's leadership, there was an "appalling and pervasive culture of impunity" in Bangladesh. Trials in which the ruling party had a political advantage were finished swiftly, whereas investigations and trials in which the ruling party or people close to the party were the offenders were postponed for years (United Nations, 2022).

The advent of subservient foreign policy became evident with how the government dealt with the India-Bangladesh relations. The Hasina government allegedly unilaterally gave the neighboring country access to road, water, and rail transit through Bangladesh, access to the Chattogram and Mongla ports for transit and cargo shipping, access to Bangladesh's power and energy sector for Indian companies, permission for Indian state-owned corporations to build a coal-based power plant that would endanger the Sundarbans (the largest mangrove forest in the world, encompassing a portion of the southern region of Bangladesh and parts of West Bengal in India), permission for Indian private companies like Adani and Reliance to build power plants in

Bangladesh, permission to develop a special economic zone, and permission to sell military equipment in exchange for India's assistance in staying in power through rigged elections (Mustafa, 2024). Between 2009 and 2023, the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) killed 594 Bangladeshis through torture or gunfire (Ain o Shalish Kendra, 2024). The Hasina government made no effort to voice opposition to the BSF's murders of Bangladeshi nationals, much less effectively urging India to halt these border crimes (Mustafa, 2024).

2018-2024: Student Movements, Enforced Disappearances, Media Censorship, and Questionable Elections

2018 was a significant year in the last decade, primarily because of two student movements – the quota reform movement and the road safety movement. During the first phase of the quota reform movement in 2018, Students from multiple universities protested in the streets, calling for equal age restrictions for all job seekers, merit-based hiring for open quota positions, and a reduction in quota-based roles. Candidates from different quotas were given preference for 56% of government posts, 30% of which went to children and grandchildren of the 1971 freedom fighters, 10% for women, 10% for residents in backward or remote districts, 5% for the indigenous communities, and 1% for persons with disabilities (The Daily Star, 2024). The demonstrators called for change, claiming that the existing system which granted 30% of the government positions to children and grandchildren of the freedom fighters was unfair and denied talented applicants' chances. On March 21, Sheikh Hasina declared that the quota system would not change, despite the mounting demonstrations (The Great Wave, 2024).

However, thousands of university students from throughout the country begin to block roads, stage processions, and boycott classes. In the second week of April, police and students engaged in fatal clashes that turned the Shahbagh crossroads in the capital Dhaka and the

surrounding areas into a battlefield, leaving at least 75 people injured. On April 11, Hasina declared that the entire quota system would be discarded (The Great Wave, 2024).

The second movement was the road safety movement, which was mostly run by school students. It all started with the death of two school students, Diya Khanam Mim and Abdul Karim Rajib, who were run over by a bus of the transportation company "Jabal-e-Noor Paribahan" on July 29. The protest began in Dhaka Airport Road first by the students of Shaheed Ramiz Uddin School and College and nearby schools and then spread out to the rest of the capital. In the following days, almost all major streets and roads of the country's capital were occupied by school students in their uniforms. Later, school students were joined by university students as well (Islam, 2018). The flame that erupted by the protest soon reached school students in other major cities of the country as well (Khan, 2024).

The protests garnered media attention for several reasons. Due to the tragic deaths and injuries caused by traffic accidents, as well as the destruction of property, road safety has long been a major problem in Bangladesh, impacting the community on a personal, social, and economic level (Hoque et al., 2007). But what sets the movement apart are the ages of the demonstrators. Students between the ages of 15 and 19, who ranged from ninth graders to high school seniors, not only brought order back to the country's roads but also independently streamlined the capital's whole traffic system. During the peak of the protests, students were observed managing Dhaka's notorious traffic and checking whether drivers of cars and buses had valid licenses and proof of vehicle roadworthiness (Press Trust of India, 2018). However, they were met with severe police brutality and violence by the ruling party's student wing Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL).

According to Jackman (2019), the elimination of powerful opposition parties in Bangladesh has led to a rise in street activism that transcends conventional political lines. These movements are primarily led by urban students, are erratic, and arise from concerns of injustice. The ruling party faces two significant risks from these movements. First, they may cause a crisis that the opposition could take advantage of and damage the legitimacy of the ruling party. Secondly, they could intensify conflicts among interest groups that the ruling party depends on to stay in office. These dangers, as well as the fine line between upholding legitimacy and employing coercion, are reflected in the state's response to concessions and repression.

That was also a time of heightened media censorship. On August 6, 2018, the then minister of telecommunications and information technology, Mostafa Jabbar, during an event shared that the government would resort to “content filtering” in response to the recent spread of “misinformation” and “rumors” on social media regarding the student protests. At that time, 40 Facebook accounts were found and investigated, and about 45 cases were filed on the grounds of disseminating false information and rumors about the protests on social media. The detective branch of the police detained and questioned photojournalist and activist Shahidul Alam, actor Kazi Nawshaba Ahmad, bloggers Mahabubur Rahman, Alamgir Hossain, Saidul Islam, and Naomi Jannat, a professor at Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology, among many others, about their social media posts (Bhorer Kagoj, 2018).

It was also the time when the Hasina government introduced the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA), which was later amended to the Cyber Security Act (CSA) in 2023. On the grounds of "defamation," "spreading false information," "hurting religious sentiments," "opposing the spirit of the Liberation War," etc., these ordinances gave law enforcement the authority to detain and imprison without an arrest warrant on an indefinite basis. Between

October 2018 and January 2023, up to 7,001 cases were brought under the DSA against 21,867 people, including politicians and journalists. Over 32 percent of the DSA/CSA accused between October 2018 and September 2023 were politicians, and 29.40 percent were journalists. The ruling party was linked to almost 78% of the complainants (Center for Governance Studies, 2024). The politics of labeling was employed on any occasions where an individual or a group dared to criticize any steps taken by the government. As Nasrin Khandoker (2024) writes, "During the Awami League government's progression towards fascist rule, their ideological weapon was the term Jamaat as the boogieman to silence any dissent. Capitalizing on a fear of fundamentalism by labeling numerous people "Jamaat" and arresting and abducting them served as the most potent tool for creating the hegemony of Awami fascism."

Meanwhile, politically motivated enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings became regular occurrences. The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) reports that between 2009 and 2022, up to 623 people in Bangladesh were victims of enforced disappearance (Amin, 2023). Of them, 383 either returned alive or were later revealed to have been arrested, while 84 were discovered dead. At least 153 people remain unaccounted for, and three more are unidentified. The captives were hidden in an illegal secret detention facility called Aynaghar (House of Mirrors), which was operated by the nation's military intelligence agency, the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) (Netra News, 2022). Meanwhile, between 2009 and 2023, 1,048 individuals died while in police custody, while 2,699 people were killed in gunfights, encounters, and crossfire, according to the human rights organization Odhikar (Mustafa, 2024).

Against this backdrop, Bangladesh had two more "one-sided" general elections (Mustafa, 2024), one in 2018 and another in 2024, marred by electoral irregularities (The Daily Star, 2019),

opposition boycott, low voter turnout, violence, and claims of vote rigging (Foyez, 2024). Since the country's independence from Pakistan in 1971, just four of Bangladesh's eleven elections have been deemed "free and fair". The rest have regularly been embroiled in violence, riots, and accusations of vote manipulation (Lawal, 2024). One and a half months before the 2018 general elections, *"Hasina: A Daughter's Tale",* a docudrama based on Sheikh Hasina's personal and political life, was released.

Fast forward to 2024, BNP yet again chose to boycott the thirteenth election because of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's refusal to accept the opposition's demands for a neutral caretaker administration to conduct the polls. BAL formed the government yet again, and Sheikh Hasina got her fourth term as the premier (Mustafa, 2024). Approximately two and a half months before the 2024 general elections, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's big-budget biopic *"Mujib: The Making of A Nation"* was released.

It was also in 2024 when the quota reform movement was revived, followed by a court ruling, which declared that the 2018 abolishment of the quota system (which reserved 30% of government jobs for the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters) was unlawful. This second phase of the quota reform movement eventually turned into a mass uprising demanding Hasina's resignation, followed by a series of police brutality incidents, violence by the ruling party's members and activists, mass arrests, and censorship, resulting in the fall of the government.

The Two Films for Analysis

Hasina: A Daughter's Tale

"Hasina: A Daughter's Tale" (2018), a docudrama by Piplu R Khan, delves into the life of Sheikh Hasina, the eldest daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh. The documentary follows a family caught amid political turmoil and revolution as it explores Bangladesh's dynamic political scene through her eyes. It was jointly produced by the Centre for Research and Information, a government-run organization, and Applebox Films, with a budget of BDT 1.8 crore (equivalent to BDT 2.5 crore or US$210,000 in 2023). The documentary had a national premier on November 15, 2018, and was internationally released on November 16, 2018 (Dhaka Tribune, 2018), one and a half months before the questionable (Khan and Dorschner, 2024) general election held on December 30 (Khan and Dorschner, 2024), after which the Sheikh Hasina-led Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) formed a government with a landslide victory. The film was released on the local streaming platform *Chorki* on August 15, 2023, the 38th anniversary of the assassination of Hasina's family members, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Dhaka Tribune, 2023).

Starting with Hasina's early years, the documentary offers a glimpse into her close-knit family and their aspirations for political power in Bangladesh which had just gained independence. It tells the story of the War of Independence and the tragic assassination of Mujib in 1975, which sent Hasina into exile. The film intricately portrays her years of displacement and resilience as she navigates the challenges of leading the opposition in exile and eventually returning to Bangladesh and joining politics as the head of Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), a political party left disorganized after her father's assassination.

Mujib: The Making of a Nation

"Mujib: The Making of a Nation" (2023) is a biopic made by Indian filmmaker Shyam Benegal and coproduced by the ministries of broadcast and information of India and Bangladesh, that chronicles the life and legacy of Bangladesh's founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The film was released on October 13, 2023, approximately two and a half months before yet another questionable general election on January 7, 2024, after which, Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) formed another government with a majority of seats in the national parliament, only to be toppled by a mass uprising on August 5, 2024 (Ahmed, 2024). The film provides a comprehensive fictional account of his journey from his early years in rural Bengal to his role as a transformative leader, who played a pivotal role in Bangladesh's independence in 1971. The film internationally earned BDT 4.1 crore (USD 350,000) at the box office and had a budget of BDT 830 million (USD 0.996 million).

The narrative captures Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's rise from a passionate student activist to a formidable political leader advocating for the rights of Bengalis under Pakistani rule, leading to his eventual assassination in a newly independent Bangladesh in 1975. The film not only highlights his personal and political sacrifices but also examines his enduring impact on Bangladesh's national identity and its ongoing journey as an independent state.

In examining these two films, one cannot ignore the role of propaganda in both the promotion and demonization of political figures—tools often used to sway public opinion and consolidate power, as reflected in the intentions and functions of propaganda.

Propaganda: Forms and Purposes

Propaganda can be defined in multiple ways. It is a term that is 400 years old and goes through significant changes in terms of its meaning (Huckin, 2016). Crane (1937) defines propaganda as something that has to "hide its real nature at all times" (p. 357). Meanwhile, Bird (1940) suggests that propaganda is the application of suggestion "in a planned and systematic way" (p. 305). A more recent and developed definition by Henderson (2010) suggests that propaganda is a "deliberate use of the pressure of persuasion in order to forestall critical thinking about choices to be made" (p.85).

Among the earliest literature on propaganda would be the works of Edward Bernays, a pioneer propagandist and public relations expert. In *"Propaganda"* (1928), Bernays situates propaganda in a business or product promotion context. Describing his tactics and industry experience, Bernays says it is essential not to compel the consumers to demand the products then and there. Instead, Bernays sought to change the core of the way consumers looked at their worlds through propaganda. His promotional tactics aimed to make it impossible for a common consumer to imagine their lives and their worlds without those products, by creating demands for things people never thought they would need in their everyday lives. An example of this is how Bernays used propaganda to introduce a "music room" as an essential component of modern homes to create demand for, and in turn help accelerate the sales of. Mozart pianos. Thus, propaganda campaigns can change the mental imagery consumers have of the world.

In *"Propaganda"*, Bernays (1928) also provides a historical justification for propaganda and states that whether propaganda is good or bad depends on the cause and accuracy of information being promoted by it (p. 48). He describes propaganda not as rumor but rather as "public relations" and posits his "invention" of counsel on public relations as a direct result of

propaganda's association with German communication practices in World War I. The book is a constant attempt to remove the negative connotations attached to the word "propaganda." Bernays tries to establish the "neutral" meaning of propaganda that was used to refer to public relations practices before the events leading up to World War I. "Modern propaganda is a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or group" (Bernays, 1928, p. 52).

Gower (2008) identifies Bernays' attempts to equate early public relations practices to propaganda as a way of elevating himself to prominence within the history of public relations. Meanwhile, Myers (2015) contends that equating propaganda with public relations is one of the biggest misperceptions in the history of public relations in the United States. Myers (2015) analyzes the use of the term "propaganda" in popular press dated from 1810 to 1918 to evaluate Bernays' attempt to distance propaganda from Germany's war effort during World War I and establish propaganda as a neutral term and finds that modern-day propaganda is still widely associated with "manipulative communication practices" (p. 552) in religious and political contexts with an inherent power structure.

In *"Propaganda"*, Bernays (1928) recognizes the importance of public opinion despite his paternalistic approach to democracy, and hence, feels the need to influence public opinion. Propaganda, according to Bernays, is required precisely because rulers could no longer do anything without the approval of the masses. It is necessary that the chosen intelligent few set up the course for the "less intelligent" masses, and direct their needs and desires, "An emotional political content must coincide in every way with the broad basic plans and minor details of the campaign, be adapted to the many groups of the public at which it is to be aimed and conform to the media of the distribution of the ideas," he wrote (Bernays, 1928, p. 116).

While Bernays (1928) portrays propaganda as an inevitable force, the natural order of things, or a rather normative set of practices concerning public relations, several other scholars (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Miller and Dinan, 2008) approach the concept from a different perspective to uncover the ways propaganda has evolved and been used, the extent, and the purposes it served. Miller and Dinan (2008) highlight the history of propaganda and how it came to be, or rather how it has always been in both war and peacetime for corporate use. They shift the lens from the American history of corporate propaganda to a more British-focused historical analysis, and in doing so, establish propaganda's role in British colonialism.

Herman and Chomsky (1988) propose their seminal propaganda model in "Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media". They describe the interconnected systems of politics and mass communication and set propaganda in a broader political context of the United States, "In countries where the levers of power are in the hands of a state bureaucracy, the monopolistic control over the media, often supplemented by official censorship, makes it clear that the media serve the ends of a dominant elite. It is much more difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media are private and formal censorship is absent" (p. 60). They identify (1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4) "flak" as a means of disciplining the media; and (5) "anticommunism" as a national religion and control mechanism as the "essential ingredients" of the model or "filters" through which information must pass in mainstream media. Since its publication, several scholars have provided evidence in support of the propaganda model (Mullen and Klaehn, 2010; Robinson, 2015). Mullen and

Klaehn (2010), and Robinson (2015) situate the propaganda model in a modern context and argue that the model continues to be relevant in explaining the trends in the United State's mass media to this day. Mullen and Klaehn (2010) also describe the two waves of criticism faced by the model, the first one being dismissal, where the model was barely acknowledged by media scholars.

The second wave saw some engagement (Mullen and Klaehn, 2010) on the critiques' part, to which both Chomsky and Herman (1996) responded. In *"The Propaganda Model Revisited"*, Herman (1996) argues that the model "describes a decentralized and non-conspiratorial market system of control and processing, although at times the government or one or more private actors may take initiatives and mobilize coordinated elite handling of an issue" (p.4). He also states, "It is a model of media *behavior and performance*, not media *effects*…The power of the U.S. propaganda system lies in its ability to mobilize an elite consensus, to give the appearance of democratic consent, and to create enough confusion, misunderstanding, and apathy in the general population to allow elite programs to go forward" (p.5). Discussing the third filter in the model, which is the dependence on official sources for news, Robinson (2015) argues, "...while technology was bringing more live event-driven news from around the world, journalists were still relying upon officials to interpret these events" (p.83), mentioning that no substantial evidence has been found that journalists depend on official sources less that before the advent of internet-driven practices.

Bernays (1923) also acknowledges the power of books, films, radios, and many other media when it comes to any sort of propaganda. In *"Crystalizing Public Opinion",* Bernays provides historical examples from ancient civilizations on how propaganda took shape through different evolving art forms, particularly in the Greek and Roman societies, "The theatre was

second only to oratory as an influence in developing opinions of the Athenian public. The populace was given to conservatism, identifying itself unreservedly with the dramatic events enacted on the stage. Tragedy carried out the traditional legendary sentiments. Comedy, less choked by tradition, produced popular plays and satiric portraits of leaders. Public opinion was swayed by oral impact, a method still potent as shown in the use of television, radio and public appearances by candidates for political offices and by the champions of causes" (p. ix-x).

Several other scholars have confirmed this trend in art history (Munro, 1960; Hall, 2005; Berger, 2008). Munro (1960) writes, "Highly educated societies demand intellectual moral and aesthetic means of strengthening the regime so often creative minds are drawn into the service of the current regime without realizing it" (p. 436). In his seminal work *"Ways of Seeing"*, John Berger (2008) discusses a distinct European oil painting tradition that dates from around 1500 to 1900. Within this tradition, the average oil paintings of the time serve as a simple illustration of what money can buy, celebrating riches and thereby reinforcing the power of the ruling elite, in terms of the portrayal of these elites that could afford to commission these works.

Hall (2005) introduces the idea of the "politics of signification" through mass media and cultural artifacts and suggests that the messages conveyed by the artifacts in the media promote the elite's interests as they control the means of production in these channels. Jacques Ellul (1973) identifies two broader categories of propaganda. The first one is propaganda of agitation, which is used to inspire revolution or weaken existing regimes. The second one is propaganda of integration, which is used to encourage people's acceptance and support for a particular regime or system. While describing the characteristics of integration propaganda, Silverstein (1987) writes, "Integration propaganda is promulgated not in pamphlets put out by small groups of subversives or in broadcasts made by foreign powers, but by the main channels of

communication- newspapers, television, movies, textbooks, political speeches etc. – produced by some of the most influential, powerful, and respected people in a society" (p. 50).

Lenin realized the power of films as a tool for "publicity" shortly after the Russian Revolution. This realization eventually led to the nationalization of the film industry in 1919, following the formation of a government-run cinema committee (Ray, 1976). One of the earliest pieces on the power of film as a primary technique to control public opinion was written by Russian politician Leon Trotsky (1923). In his 1923 essay "Vodka, the Church, and the Cinema", Trotsky recognized the propagandistic significance of cinema, which could be utilized to manipulate people and affect popular opinion, "This weapon (the cinema)… is the best instrument for propaganda… a propaganda which is accessible to everyone, which is attractive, which cuts into the memory and may be made a possible source of revenue…. The cinema competes not only with the tavern but also with the church…. The Orthodox Church … never was successful in penetrating deeply into the consciousness of the masses…"

Trotsky (1923) also illustrates how the visual manipulative power of cinema does not depend on the audience's literacy level due to its emotional appeals. The audience's response to the medium thus has the potential to become "semi-automatic, leaving no room for autonomous or critical reflection" (Andrae, 1979, p.10). In describing films as an "organ of public opinion", Livingston and Platinga (2009) comment that the medium's significance is not lessened by the fact that they are "designed to entertain as well as inform" (p. 30).

The power of film as a tool for propaganda was widely acknowledged by propagandists in Nazi Germany. Nazi propagandist Hans Traub (1932) recognized film as an effective propaganda tool due to its incomprehensible richness of rhythm, which can intensify emotional responses. In his autobiography *"Mein Kampf"*, Adolf Hitler (1939) emphasized the powerful

psychological effects created by the visual media, “The picture, in all its forms, including the film, has better prospects. In a much shorter time, at one stroke I might say, people will understand a pictorial presentation of something which it would take them a long and laborious effort of reading to understand” (p.434).

Films have important documentation value when it comes to reconstructing the collective memory regarding certain historical events. According to Kellner (2003), films can “construct social memory and foster patriotism and nationalism through their discourses, resonant images, and narratives that contribute to the mobilization of thought and behavior” (p. 107). On the Hollywood representation of the events surrounding World War II, Sturken (1997) observes, “[s]urvivors of traumatic historical events often relate that as time goes by, they have difficulty distinguishing their personal memories from those of popular culture. For many World War II veterans, Hollywood's World War II movies have subsumed their individual memories into a general script” (p. 104).

However, Herman and Chomsky (1988) do not include films in their model as a component of the propaganda machine. Edgley (2000) identifies Chomsky’s tendency towards “verifiable, quantifiable empirical evidence” and the movies being reliant on “connotation rather than denotation” as the reason for not including films in the propaganda model. Chomsky (2004) later clarified not including cinema in the propaganda model by claiming that he “simply doesn’t know enough about movies”. Based on Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) propaganda model, Alford (2017) proposes a propaganda model specifically for mainstream Hollywood, where the scholar identifies “concentrated ownership; the importance of merchandising; dependence on establishment sources; the disproportionate ability of the powerful to create flak; and a dominant ideology of ‘us’ versus the ‘other’” as the five filters.

For this thesis, the definition adopted and operationalized is that of integration propaganda, which Ellul (1973) and Silverstein (1950) describe as something that inspires people to accept and support a particular regime or system by the main modes of mass communication such as print and electronic media, movies, textbooks, political speeches etc.

Ideology

An inherent connection can be drawn between propaganda and ideology. Logan (2014) describes how earlier public relations professionals' work with corporations employed ideology as a mental framework for the corporate voice by producing and reproducing certain ideological meanings that establish corporation as a necessary, natural, and benevolent organization in society. Foss (2018) also describes ideology as a mental framework that works as the "concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation" deployed by a certain group to make sense of and define the world or some aspect of it. It is usually composed of evaluative beliefs with possible alternatives and works to establish hegemony in a social system, where the ideology of one group (usually one with more power) is privileged over the other groups (Foss, 2018).

On the other hand, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) suggest that ideological concerns revolve around how varied groups with competing interests coexist in a community (p. 222). While Williams (1977) argues that "ideology" is the term used by psychologists to describe how attitudes are arranged into a "coherent pattern", Caroll (1988) portrays it as an "epistemically defective" set of ideas to uphold a practice of "social domination". In that sense, ideology is not individualistic, but rather socially determined.

In 1797, Antoine-Louis-Claude and Comte Destutt de Tracy first coined the term "ideology" for the study of how cooperative societies are regulated through ideas (Heywood, 2021; Kennedy, 1979). Marx and Engels (1845) gave it a negative connotation by equating ideology with the ideas of the ruling class, whom they recognized as both the material and intellectual forces of a society. According to Marx, the ruling class employs cultural artifacts to maintain their interests by manipulating the working classes into believing in the ideology they preach, which modern-day Marxist theorists have identified as the employment of mass media (White, 1992). The interpretations and perceptions of the consumers of such messaging through mass media follow a dynamic process with multiple influences (Baran and Davis, 1995; Van Berg et al., 2004; Croteau and Hoynes, 2013). In defining the characteristics of ideology, Marx mentions that an ideology has no history (Heath, 1976), in the sense that the history of an ideology is not autonomous but situated in the dynamic of a particular relevant period. However, historicity comes into play when the production of "subject meanings" of certain artifacts is considered. On the other hand, Robinson (2015) identifies two functions of ideology: justifying elite-driven policy decisions by making them appear "legitimate, natural and inevitable"; and excluding alternative positions that might destabilize their narrative (p. 86).

Since Marx, critics of ideology, including Trotsky, Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, and Althusser, have attributed the formation and spread of dominant ideas to class affiliation or representation of class interests (Cloud & Gunn, 2011). Althusser (1970), for example, portrays ideology as a certain way of representing reality which only provides an illusion of the said reality. This illusion is comprehensible only through its form, comprising of representations, images, signs, etc., and how they are combined and arranged. Althusser (1970) also introduces the idea of the "ideological state apparatus", which consists of every institution, including the

mass media, to work towards establishing the narrative and ideologies of the dominant class. Comolli and Narboni (1971) focus specifically on the medium of cinema and state that the medium is burdened by the responsibility of reproducing things not in their real form, but "as they appear when refracted through ideology."

Several scholars have employed ideological criticism from multiple angles and contexts to analyze films. Pearce (2015) examines the documentaries by Wiseman, Malle, and Moore that challenge the dominant ideological narratives in American cinema, where he finds three connecting threads that constitute these dominant ideologies – authority, solidarity, and myth. In rhetorically analyzing the 1975 blockbuster *"Jaws"*, Jameson (1979) found that the film works as a decoy to draw attention from the tacit alliance between multinational corporations and institutions responsible for upholding law and order. Caputi (1978) conducts an ideological analysis from a gendered lens and finds that the film reaffirms patriarchy by scapegoating a feminine character for the ills of capitalism. Frentz and Rushing (1993) try to bridge the relationship between these two analyses by situating class and gender "within the context of the white man's adaptation of the holistic hunting rituals of the American Indian" (p. 62).

Meanwhile, Rajgopal and Vohra (2012) discuss Indian documentary films, particularly the "Hindutva" propaganda films patronized by the current Modi regime in India, from an aesthetic and ideological perspective to investigate the mobilization of political advantage, global funding, and exhibition through these films. Rollins (1976) also applies an ideological approach in critiquing the rhetoric of three documentary films from the New Deal era – *Land of Cotton, The River, and Native Land*. In a 1986 *Time* article, Lamar discusses the ideological connotations and effects of the 1986 Tom Cruise-starrer blockbuster *"Top Gun"*, "Its [Top Gun] glorified portrayal of Navy life spurred theater owners … to ask the Navy to set up recruiting exhibits

outside cinemas where Top Gun was playing to sign up the young moviegoers intoxicated by the Hollywood fantasy" (p. 1).

Given that the political history of Bangladesh embodies distinct ideological positions that are intricately reflected in the films under analysis, these films serve as cultural mirrors, expressing or challenging these ideologies. This connection between history, ideology, and cinematic storytelling highlights why ideological criticism is a fitting approach for this study, enabling a nuanced examination of the interplay between political narratives and their representations in the two biopics in the discussion.

For this thesis, the definition adopted and operationalized is that of Foss (2018), who describes ideology as a mental framework that works as the "concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation" deployed by a certain group to make sense of and define the world or some aspect of it.

Research Reflexivity

I, Nahaly, identify as a Bangladeshi South Asian woman. I was born and brought up in a progressive Muslim family, where culture and religion coexisted peacefully. For my entire elementary, middle, and high school education, I attended private Catholic Missionary schools based in Bangladesh's capital Dhaka. I went to college in University of Dhaka, Bangladesh's oldest public university. It was there that I was introduced to people from diverse backgrounds, holding a diverse set of opinions from across the country. As a sophomore, I witnessed and participated in the two most significant student movements of 2018. These experiences made me reflect on the tendency to unquestioningly bow down to authority as well as on the importance of freedom of speech. This introspection eventually brought me to journalism. My time working in

a newsroom at a time of heightened media censorship in Bangladesh made me curious about political propaganda and how it takes shape through various media. My experience as a journalist has inspired me to focus my research interests on political propaganda and how the nuances in history can be exploited in favor of certain groups, of which this thesis is a part.

Chapter 3: Method

Methodologically, this thesis will engage in a modified ideological criticism. Ideological criticism is defined as a method where a critic looks beyond the surface structure of an artifact to discover the beliefs, values, and assumptions it suggests (Foss, 2018). The method is appropriate for the analysis of this thesis as it aligns with the research questions it aims to explore in investigating the dominant ideologies portrayed in the films. The thesis will engage an ideological critique that deconstructs or breaks down the central concepts evident in the films under study and critically analyze the basic structures and assumptions that govern them (Foss, 2018).

Foss (2018) identifies the steps of the procedures to ideological criticism. These include, 1) selecting an artifact, 2) analyzing the artifact, 3) formulating a research question, 4) writing a critical essay. I have already completed the first step by selecting my two artifacts, *"Hasina: A Daughter's Tale"* (2018) and *"Mujib: The Making of a Nation"* (2023). I have also completed the third step, having presented my research questions -- the dominant ideology in the films and the role they intended to play to establish BAL regime's stronghold on state power -- in the introduction. Thus, my thesis employs a modified version of Foss's (2018) ideological criticism method by altering the sequence of these steps as described by Foss (2018).

With steps one and three being completed, I will explain how the thesis employs steps two and four as part of my modified ideological critique. Foss's step two, analyzing the artifact consists of four parts – identifying the presented elements, identifying the suggested elements, formulating an ideology, and identifying the functions the said ideology serves. My analysis will identify relevant elements presented in the artifact, meaning the films I am analyzing, and other aspects that allude to ideology and/or propaganda through a visual analysis of certain scenes, including dialogues, and images. My analysis uncovers the ideology manifest in the artifact, as well as investigates its function, meaning what the ideology aims to communicate to the film's audience.

The fourth and final step of the ideological criticism method is writing the critical essay. According to Foss (2018), there are five major components to writing a critical essay: an introduction discussing the research questions, its contribution to rhetorical theory, and its significance; a description and context of the artifact; a description of the method (ideological criticism, in this case); findings of the analysis, discussing the ideology and the rhetorical strategies employed by the artifact to promote said ideology; and a discussion of the analysis and its contribution to rhetorical theory. So far, the thesis has provided the introduction, with the research questions and their significance; a description and context of the artifact; and the description of the method. The analysis, its findings, and the discussion will be presented in subsequent sections of the thesis.

I begin by analyzing the films to identify their ideologies and then afterwards discuss the contribution of my thesis to ideological theory and propaganda literature. The thesis will analyze *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* (2023) first, followed by *Hasina: A Daughter's Tale* (2018). Although *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* (2023) was released second, the events portrayed in

this film chronologically come before those in *Hasina: A Daughter's Tale* (2018). Presenting the films in the chronological order in which the events transpired (opposed to the chronological order in which the films were released) should aid the reader's understanding of the sequence of events portrayed in the films. Both films are analyzed in terms of key themes that emerged in the process of the analysis.

Chapter 4: Analysis

Mujib: The Making of a Nation

The 02:45:00 long film has been analyzed scene by scene, with 54 of the scenes being analyzed. The analysis led the scenes to be divided into 7 key themes. These themes include: scenes where protagonist Mujib was the sole focus (under the subhead "Mujib: The Focus of the Frame"), scenes with Mujib and his mentor Suhrawardy to show his development as a politician (under "The Mentor-Mentee Dynamic: Mujib and Suhrawardy"), scenes with Mujib's political adversary Bhutto (under "The Protagonist Meets His Worthy (?) Opponent: Mujib and Bhutto"), scenes were Mujib is shown with his colleagues and the villains, i.e. Khondaker Mushtaque and Major General Ziaur Rahman (under "The Heroes and the Villains: Tajuddin, Mushtaque, and Major General Ziaur Rahman"), scenes were Mujib was absent (under "Mujib Gets Zero Screen Time: What Does the Absence Say?"), scenes where Mujib is shown with his family (under "Mujib: A Family Man"), and the final scenes of Mujib and his family's assassination (under "The Final Moments"). The analysis does not exactly follow the chronology of events as presented in the film. Rather, it follows the themes and puts the scenes under each theme in the chronological order of events as presented in the film. The categorization puts the protagonist in different settings and dynamics, which proves to be a helpful way in examining the ideology(ies)

being portrayed in the film through the presented and suggested elements and the protagonist's interactions with other characters.

Mujib: The Focus of the Frame

The opening scene starts on January 10, 1972. The movie starts with protagonist Mujib on his flight back to an independent Bangladesh after a nine-month war, throughout which he was imprisoned in Pakistan. He looks out of the plane window, taking a bird's eye view of the 56,000 square miles of his newly independent motherland, as an acapella humming of Bangladesh's national anthem plays in the background, followed a patriotic song in a folk arrangement. These are all wide-angle shots, delivering an objective or third person point-of-view. The opening credits roll out as the greenery and the vast riverine network of the newly independent Bangladesh unfolds – a defining characteristic of the landscape of Bengal. The starting point of the film is the culmination of everything Mujib's political career has worked towards.

Upon his landing, Mujib is greeted by a massive crowd, led by the four key leaders of the war of independence – Tajuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam, ATM Kamaruzzaman, and M Mansur Ali. They were also accompanied by Khondaker Mushtaque, who portrays the villain in the story, Mujib's sons Sheikh Kamal and Sheikh Jamal, and his nephew Sheikh Moni. The crowd greets him with the national anthem and deafening chants of *"Joy Bangla, Joy Bangabandhu"* (Victory to Bengal, Victory to Bangabandhu, a crucial slogan in the movement for Bangladesh's independence, later co-opted by BAL as their party slogan). The cinematographer opts for a long shot in this scene to capture the crowd, while the sound captures the ecstasy of the moment.

In an expression of his patriotism, Mujib is then seen touching the grounds of his independent country, and placing his forehead on it, as Muslims do while performing their regular prayer. He then proceeds to greet Bhasani, with whom he has had significant political differences throughout both their careers (Rahman, 2017) and touches his feet. Touching the feet of an elder is a common custom in many South Asian cultures, and this act goes on to show the respect Mujib has for his senior colleagues despite their differences.

The scene then cuts to the Racecourse ground (present day Suhrawardy Garden) in Dhaka (06:59), which Mujib addresses the crowd as the sovereign of the independent Bangladesh. The cinematographer goes for a wide-angle shot of the crowd, while Mujib remains in the center, facing them and turning his back to the frame.

The scene again cuts back to face Mujib with a closer long shot, who starts his speech by paying his respects to the martyrs and the people of his country, both Hindus and Muslims, who fought so relentlessly to defend their motherland and free themselves from the oppressors. “All my dreams have come true today,” he says, “I was sentenced to death while I was in a Pakistani prison. I saw my own grave being dug. I wished for only one thing – I asked them to send my body to my people. I told them – I'm a Bangalee, Bangla is my language, and the soil of Bengal is my place to be... I told them – I'm a Bangalee, I’m a Muslim, and I’m a human. We only die once.” These statements hint towards not only his courage and resilience as a leader but also his secular ideology and the core values of his brand of nationalism. For example, they highlight his love for the Bangla language, a key driving factor in the struggle for independence of the Bangladeshis. He is also very proud of his Muslim identity and taps into that sentiment to relate to the majority of the population.

At 08:33, he makes an emotional appeal during his speech to his people, “not as the president, but as their brother”, to successfully uphold the spirit of independence, which will go in vain if the people of the country don’t get food, clothing, and employment. These points hint towards the socialist and welfare aspects of Mujib’s political philosophy, and his drive toward the economic freedom of the Bangladeshis (highlighted later in the movie as well), which made him the unquestionable leader of the independence movement. At 10:00, he expresses his commitment to a socialist, democratic, and secular Bangladesh.

In an attempt to thank the Indian government and its people for their support towards the Bangladeshi cause, he says, “Bangladesh and India are brothers” (10:28). In the actual speech which inspired this scene, Mujib mentions Mrs. Indira Gandhi and India multiple times for their cooperation and support. However, he also thanked and congratulated multiple states, including Russia, Britain, Germany, France, and even the US, the country who maintained their alliance with Pakistan throughout the war under the Nixon administration (Askari, 2020). This expression is aligned with the motto of Bangladesh’s foreign policy since independence -- “Friendship to all, malice towards none” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh, 2021). However, the mention of these other countries remains absent in the scene.

Secularism remains a core theme of Mujib’s portrayal in the film. After the 1947 partition and the formation of Pakistan as an Islamic republic with the Muslim majority areas of the Indian subcontinent, Mujib is still seen preaching secularism to rural Bengalis and expresses the desire of a Pakistan where people of all religions can live in harmony (32:25). He also promotes Bengali folk culture, by leading a procession with folk musicians. “Yes, this is a Muslim majority country. But we must remember that first and foremost, we are humans, and we are Bangalees,” he says, hinting towards a budding sense of Bengali nationalism. Right after the

opening scenes, the character of Mujib's wife becomes the sole narrator of the story throughout the film.

At 32:44, a wide shot cuts into a zoom-in of Mujib, who is seen making an emotional speech to the students at Dhaka University, promoting the cause of Bangla as a state language in Pakistan. His skills as an orator are highlighted with emotional appeal, where he presents poetic praises of the language in an attempt to unite students, intellectuals, and the working class in the cause.

The movie aptly follows the days Mujib spent in jail as a political prisoner, a defining feature of his political career. In a moment of solitary confinement (45:49) after being refused bail for protesting Jinnah's remarks regarding making Urdu the sole state language of Pakistan, he sings a patriotic song by prominent Bengali playwright and poet DL Roy. The film adopts a warm color palette in most scenes, however, this is the first scene where it introduces a dark tonality, to represent the isolation of solitary confinement. He is seen pacing anxiously. The background is minimally arranged with lowkey lighting coming from a small, barred window. The light is the only thing adding a warm undertone to the scene, as though to keep the hope and spirit of resistance alive. Amid all the anxieties, the thing that keeps him going is the thought of his country and his people, suggested by the song he sings.

It also helps him bond with a prison guard, a fellow DL Roy fan. He shows Mujib a copy of *Ittefaq,* a popular Bangla newspaper at the time, where Mujib made the front page as his mentor Suhrawardy made a move for his release. The guard is impressed by the fact that Mujib is a friend of the Ittefaq editor, Tofazzal Hossain Manik Mia, and used to write for his paper. Mujib's admiration of the Ittefaq editor hints to his loyalty towards the cause of press freedom, a theme that comes back later in the film as well. The guard gives him a pen and a paper from a

cigarette packet to write a letter to his wife, where he informs her of his decision to go on a hunger strike and asks her to take care of his parents and the children. Mujib, it seems, is portrayed as a family man through and through.

At 49:00:00, he is seen being transferred to a different prison in a different district, where his followers gather outside of the prison gate, chanting in favor of his release and demanding Bangla as a state language. Mujib is heavily bearded in this scene, moving away from his classic clean-shaven and mustached look. He wears a beige panjabi, a traditional attire for South Asian men. His physical weakness from the hunger strike is evident in this scene. He still takes a moment to look at the crowd and raise his hands to greet them and express solidarity. At 49:32:00, he is seen resisting the attempts by prison guards to break his hunger strike. In a brutal and inhuman attempt to break their hunger strike, the guards pin him and his associate Mohiuddin to the ground while forcibly trying to push some milk through a pipe and a funnel down their throats, which both of them vehemently resist.

Soon, the news of the Feb 21 shooting of students defying curfew to press their demands of Bangla as a state language reaches Mujib and Mohiuddin in the prison. Mujib proclaims with tears in his eyes, “This day will be commemorated as the Martyr’s Day for generations to come.” (50:12:00). It seems as though he not only made the prediction but also came up with the original idea. As his health deteriorates, he is sent to his village home in Gopalganj’s Tungipara because the authorities did not want to be responsible for his death while he was in police custody. There, he slowly starts to recover. As his wife’s character narrates the story, she adds how Mujib “defeated death on its face”, adding yet another mythical and larger-than-life note to this event (52:06).

At 55:26, Mujib is seen conducting his electoral campaign for his first provincial election in 1954. He runs a bike rally with his supporters while his Muslim League opponent comes with more party men in trucks. We only see a side profile of his opponent, a bearded man wearing a skull cup and a panjabi, and don't get any names. He is of course at an elevated angle as he is riding a truck, so his audience has to look up to get a glimpse of him, creating a distance between him and the people. Mujib, on the other hand, is at eye level with the people he is trying to reach, as though giving them a message that he is one of them. They are seen crossing each other at one point, drawing a sharp contrast between the resources each of these candidates has.

However, Mujib wins the election through sheer hard work and the connection he establishes with the most poverty-afflicted population in his area. He goes to a humble hut owned by a woman, who wears a plain shari (a traditional piece of clothing for South Asian women), and offers him food and a few pennies from her savings as her blessing. Mujib vehemently refuses to take the money, while the woman insists him to take it as a token of her love and blessings, saying she doesn't have anything else to offer to him. Mujib is overwhelmed with this expression of love and looks more determined than ever to change the fate of his people through his politics. With this one single scene, he is yet again shown as the people's man, again highlighting the socialist aspects of his political philosophy (55:31).

The movie progresses towards Mujib's shift to demanding autonomy for the Bengalis in East Pakistan. At 01:17:37, he first refers to East Pakistan as "Bangladesh", referencing the works of poet Rabindranath Tagore (who uses this word in a lot of his patriotic poems and songs concerning the Bengal region) in a political meeting with his Awami League colleagues, while formulating the 6-point demand for the autonomy of the Bengali people. The facial reaction of the people in the room suggests that this is the first time they have heard of this word in a

political context, suggesting Mujib as the mastermind or auteur of this thought of a potential independent state. The next scene changes its background six times (for each demand from the six points) with multiple tracking shots as Mujib is seen addressing people in different parts of East Pakistan. The shots move from the crowd to Mujib's face as he speaks, with the greenery of East Pakistan's landscape in the background every time (except the last one which is set against a grim, dark background in an abandoned factory-like setting. Here, he presents the final demand from the six points, immediately after which he is taken into police custody again), as if to mark the territories of an autonomous Bengal. His iconic use of his index finger while he speaks is prevalent in each shot. These shots also showcase a change in the weather in each of the six times, to show his determination to the cause of Bengal's autonomy. In almost every scene throughout the film, including this one, he is seen wearing either beige or pure white clothes, suggesting the purity of his intentions.

The next significant scene with Mujib being the sole focus is when he is being transferred to another prison after being charged with sedition in 1968 (01:27:27). This one is heavily dramatized, where he is told he got his bail petition approved, brought out of the prison, only to be met by army officials ready to arrest him again. He is at the center of the screen when the headlights of an army jeep flash on his face. He covers his face, removes his hands the next moment, and has a moment of realization regarding the situation. In an even more dramatized expression, he gets on his knees while maintaining a fierce and determined eye contact with the jeep, takes a fist full of soil from the ground and rubs it on his forehead, while the soon-to-be national anthem of independent Bangladesh plays in the background. He stands out with his white panjabi amid the beige police uniforms, with his unrelenting expression of patriotism, courage and resilience.

In the very next scene (01:28:17), he is seen being interrogated by an army official regarding the sedition charges. In this crane shot, the interrogating army official is seen on the left of the frame. Mujib calmly sits facing him while smoking his iconic pipe (Ruud, 2022). The small room is lit with a red dimmed hue. There's one small window to Mujib's side, the only source of external light. There are two beds in that room, a dresser behind his back, and a small side table in the middle of the two beds. Mujib, amid all this, remains fearless. When asked about his alleged conspiracy with India against Pakistan and his government, he shouts at the officer, "What conspiracy? I've been rotting in your prison cells for the past 21 months," he changes from English to Urdu, "I've been in solitary confinement throughout this time. What could I possibly conspire against the government from here?"

This scene is a testament to his fierce and confrontational nature against falsehood and oppression, which angers the army officer. Mujib, on the other hand, sits calmly after the outburst and continues smoking his pipe. He gives the officer rational advice to run an inquiry against him. "Killing me will not prove your lies to be true," he says. The second time he loses his cool is when the officer accuses his wife of being an Indian spy. This goes on to show how protective he is when it comes to his family, "She is a simple woman. What does she have to do with politics?...God won't forgive you if you drag my family into this."

At 01:34:20, Mujib is seen getting a massive reception by his followers on Feb 23, 1969, after being released from prison and acquitted of the sedition charges. The soon-to-be national anthem plays again in the background. This is the first time he is seen in his iconic white panjabi and black coat combination. This is also the day when he is titled *"Bangabandhu"* (Friend of Bengal), a title synonymous with his iconic black coat (Ruud, 2022).

At this point in his political career, he is completely nonchalant about getting arrested again and again for his politics and activism in favor of Bengali autonomy, as can be seen at 01:20:12. In this scene, he asks the police to take him away after he finishes a speech detailing the 6-point demand. Similar sentiments regarding getting arrested are portrayed at 01:55:46, where he writes the proclamation of Bangladesh's independence after Operation Searchlight begins on March 25, 1971, right after which an army convoy comes to his house to arrest him. He takes some time to dress up, asks his wife to pack him a bag, bids his family farewell, and goes with dignity. However, he doesn't go without asking some crucial questions. *"Mohollah kyun jala diya?"* (Why did you set fire to the neighborhood if you're here for me?), he asks in Urdu to the army officers coming in to arrest him, out of rage, and concern for his neighbors.

Another core theme in Mujib's portrayal is his fearless confrontation with death, which gives a mythic and larger-than-life aspect to his character, as mentioned earlier. At 02:10:55, Mujib is seen sitting in a room with low-key lighting. There's a wall behind him, half of which is painted in white; the lower half is black. The white paint is wearing off, with spots all over it. Our protagonist can hear three soldiers digging his grave outside. This was after he was sentenced to death for treason in 1971, while Bangladesh's war of independence was ongoing against Pakistan. He peeks through the only small window in the room to see his grave being dug. He smiles to himself, and starts reciting the Quran, the holy book of Muslims. A Pakistani official enters his room, while he jokes with him about his impending death sentence, "I'm with my God already (while holding the Quran), you don't have to rush to send me to him... how many have been as fortunate as me? I just saw my own grave being dug!"

At 02:21:00, an Indian journalist comes to interview Mujib as the sovereign of an independent Bangladesh. He starts by conveying Mrs. Indira Gandhi's regards to him, to which

he yet again acknowledges India's support during the war. At 02:21:28, he lists his four big achievements as the premier of a newly formed war-torn country – the return of 10 million war refugees from India, restoration of law and order in the country, restoration of communication channels and infrastructures damaged during the war, and a new constitution for the People's Republic of Bangladesh. He also announces the soon-to-be-held first election of independent Bangladesh.

At 02:22:28, he is seen conducting his electoral campaign. This time, he is accompanied by a huge number of BAL members in a much bigger engine-run boat, with another small replica of a boat attached to it. He looks high and mighty as he stands on the boat. In her narration in the background, Mrs. Mujib addresses the famine the country found itself in post-independence and blames it on the lack of goodwill from other countries.

At 02:24:08, the camera zooms in on Mujib's face as he reads the proclamation of a temporary one-party state solution and announces the formation of BAKSAL. Mujib is seen in all black this time while he announces BAKSAL as the party "for all the people in Bangladesh" for the time being and promises to go back to parliamentary democracy in three years. His wife's narration in the background portrays this move as a solution to the ongoing issues in the country. However, neither Mujib's proclamation nor his wife's narration sheds any light on the practical implications of this on a democratic country, with all the other political parties being banned (Lawal, 2024; Mascarenhas, 1986; Mohaimen, 2024).

At 02:26:17, Mujib's wife narrations recall how he was left alone by his most loyal friends in the face of challenges. She advises him to bring back Bhasani for BAKSAL's organization. He goes to Bhasani's village home, shares a meal with him, and asks for his involvement, counsel, and blessings. Meanwhile, a pro-Mujib procession is shown in Dhaka

University, where students chant slogans like “One leader, one state, Sheikh Mujib’s Bangladesh”, suggesting that people had unrelenting support for Mujib and his new one-party solution, and highlighting his cult of personality to a greater extent. Mrs. Mujib’s narration also identifies right-wing fundamentalists, left-wing extremists, and a section within the army as the culprits who contributed to making the country “unstable” under Mujib’s “peaceful” reign – a narrative that sets Mujib apart from the extremity in both ends and positions him as the righteous sovereign.

At 02:03:33, Mujib is seen meeting with an Indian delegate at his sons’ wedding reception, who asks for a closed-door meeting to warn him about a potential coup being planned by some “Pakistan returnee army officials” within the Bangladesh Army. This is an interesting spin, considering the masterminds of the coup, Majors Farooque and Rashid, were both freedom fighters in the 1971 war (Mascarenhas, 1986). Major General Ziaur Rahman, who is portrayed as the mastermind behind the coup in the film, led an entire sector of freedom fighters during the war of independence as a sector commander (Hasan, Mirza, & Khondaker, 2009).

In response to such concerns, Mujib says, “No Bengali will ever shoot me. These are my people, why would I be afraid of them?...If there’s any trouble, it will come from the outside, not from within [the country], mark my words.” His statement reflects his undying loyalty towards his people, which he naturally expects in return from them.

Overall, Mujib’s portrayal in the film reflects his commitment to democracy, secularism, socialism, and Bengali nationalism – also the four pillars of the first constitution of the independent Bangladesh. These were later co-opted by his supporters as the pillars of “Mujibism”, a new brand of political ideology formulated by them (Khan, 2007). As for his persona, he is shown as someone who is a family man and a people’s man through and through.

He deeply respects his elders, but he is also fiercely confrontational when it comes to injustices and oppression. Another mythic element found in this portrayal is his unrelenting courage and determination even in the face of death, which gives his character a larger-than-life quality. In the next section, the thesis will examine the scenes Mujib shares with the character of his political mentor Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy to get into a deeper analysis of political persona.

The Mentor-Mentee Dynamic: Mujib and Suhrawardy

The Mujib-Suhrawardy dynamic plays an important role in the movie to determine the course of Mujib's political career, and the icons associated with his cult of personality. For example, in the scene where he encounters his mentor for the first time (15:52), he is mere schoolboy who performs at a cultural function in front of Bengal's then Prime Minister AK Fazlul Haque and Education Minister Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy. When the ministers are about to leave right after the performance, he rushes to them in his costume and talks to them about the funding requirements to renovate the school building. The principal is disapproving of his approach, but Suhrawardy is encouraging and asks him to file an application in this regard. Before leaving, he asks Mujib to meet him if he makes a trip to Kolkata, where Suhrawardy was based during the British colonial period. Mujib is ecstatic, he starts chanting "Long live Suhrawardy Sahib" and is joined by the crowd shortly.

Suhrawardy was quick to recognize his potential as a leader. The next time he meets Suhrawardy is in Kolkata, where he goes to get his undergraduate degree. He introduces himself during a political meeting held at Suhrawardy's residence. Someone leaves him a chair at the table immediately (19:23:00), hinting towards the aura of importance he carried even as a young and humble college student. When Suhrawardy asks him about his plans to join his party as a

young activist, he expresses his willingness immediately and raises a fist to show his enthusiasm, which can also be translated as an expression of his political ambitions.

At 01:01:27, Mujib is seen having a political debate with Tofazzal Hossain Manik Mia, the editor of *Ittefaq,* on whether Suhrawardy should accept the offer of assuming Pakistan's premiership. Mujib has on multiple occasions expressed his admiration of Manik Mia as a fearless journalist and political analyst (Rahman, 2017). The symbolism in the mise en scène is significant. They sit in their party office, with Suhrawardy in the middle, Mujib to his left and Manik Mia to his right, signifying political freedom and press freedom simultaneously. There is light coming out of the window, and one bulb lights the ceiling over Mujib. The portraits of two great Bengali poets, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore, hang on the wall above them, representing their close affiliation with the Bengali culture. On the right corner behind the table are placards from the Language Movement. It seems as if the entire setup is gearing for a Bengali nationalist movement. Mujib is the youngest and most enthusiastic member at the table, as if predicting his taking the helm of it all pretty soon.

At 01:11:24, Mujib goes to visit Suhrawardy in London, who is undergoing medical treatment. His mentor notices his habit of smoking cigarettes and gifts him his first pipe, which went on to become an iconic symbol of his personality (Ruud, 2022). Throughout the movie, Suhrawardy's counsel and political wisdom goes on to shape Mujib's own political philosophy as he challenges Mujib's strong opinions with his composure, something he goes on to imitate in his interactions with his junior colleagues, like Tajuddin, later in the film.

In the next section, the portrayal of Mujib's political adversary Zulfiqur Ali Bhutto is examined against his own to shed more light on the political ideologies he preaches.

The Protagonist Meets His Worthy (?) Opponent: Mujib and Bhutto

At 01:37:45, both Mujib and Bhutto are seen conducting their electoral campaigns for the much-hyped 1970 general elections. Mujib conducts his campaign solely on boats, which is also his electoral symbol, as he goes from one area to another in a region interconnected through a vast riverine network. The boats are also symbolic in the sense that they get the leader closer to his people, in the most remote of areas, in the most economically feasible manner.

On the other hand, Bhutto contests with the electoral symbol of a sword. He wields his sword in a defiant manner at an assembly, where he stands on a stage while his audience has to look up to him, like a warlord being put on a pedestal and revered by his supporters from a distance.

At 01:41:48, Mujib gets a private audience with Bhutto regarding the formation of a national assembly after Mujib gets a landslide victory in the 1970 election. Bhutto raises objection to Mujib's premiership on the grounds that West Pakistanis will not accept it. "After all, we created Pakistan," says Bhutto with an air of arrogance. To which Mujib reminds him the key contributions towards the formation of Pakistan was made by Bengalis. He is also steadfast in implementing his 6-point demand, much to Bhutto's dismay. Mujib reminds him how his people did not get what they deserve from Pakistan and have grown impatient with the ongoing oppression and delays in holding the national assembly. He tries to warn Bhutto of the consequences of this delay. To add more elements of suspense to the scene, Mujib does not finish his last sentence. He only says, "Otherwise..." and simply shrugs and lights up his pipe. Bhutto is visibly angered and leaves the conversation after muttering "Preposterous!" Mujib remains seated, smoking his pipe calmly, resolute with his determination of the autonomy he promised his people prior to the elections.

The next section analyzes the portrayal of the villains in this story and how that corresponds to the portrayal of Mujib and his close associates, represented by Tajuddin in the film.

The Heroes and The Villains: Tajuddin, Mushtaque, and Ziaur Rahman

From the very beginning of the film, Khondaker Mushtaque has been a villain in the making. This is also evident at 40:56:00, he is visibly upset when he does not get a top position at the newly formed Awami Muslim League, convened by Mawlana Bhasani. His envious attitude towards Mujib is evident from this scene. At 01:15:15, the Awami League is seen holding its first meeting after Suhrawardy's death at its party office. This is the scene where Mushtaque gets his first dialogue in the movie. Here, his politics is portrayed as that of an opportunist, drawing a sharp contrast with Mujib's firm and steadfast political intentions. Mushtaque wants the party to go easy on "Islamabad" (referring to the West Pakistani military administration) and focus only on ensuring the constitutional rights for the Bengalis. He claims that it will be the only way to honor Suhrawardy's legacy.

On the other hand, Mujib wants to launch a movement for the autonomy of the Bengali people and wants to work towards their economic emancipation as well. He is vehemently supported by Tajuddin (who gets his first dialogue here as well) and Ittefaq editor Manik Mia. It's also when Mujib talks about prioritizing "Bangladesh". Mushtaque does not seem so happy with this proposition. He lights a cigarette, as if the very thought of the movement towards autonomy is stressful for him.

The next two scenes with Mushtaque also feature Tajuddin as a fierce opposition to his arguments. At 01:46:20, the trio are seen sitting on the porch of Mujib's residence, right before

his historic March 7, 1971, speech. Mujib is sitting in the middle of the frame, smoking his pipe with Mushtaque to his left and Tajuddin to his right. Mujib's wife stands right behind him like his shadow. Student leaders pressurize Mujib to declare independence on the same day. Mushtaque expresses his vehement support -- a surprising change in his stance -- considering how he was against going strict on Islamabad just a few years ago. Tajuddin plays the voice of reason and lays out security concerns of declaring independence right away. Mushtaque accuses him of being a coward. Mujib silences the crowd and asks them to leave the decision with him. Immediately after this scene, he makes his historic speech, where he doesn't declare independence right away, but leaves enough hints for the next course of action if the West Pakistani military administration doesn't budge.

At 01:51:45, during an ongoing Awami League meeting, Tajuddin receives a phone call with news that Chief Martial Law administrator General Yahya left Dhaka before concluding the ongoing discussions on holding the national assembly. Everyone in the room can sense what's about to happen. Mushtaque is the first one to suggest that the Awami League leadership should cross the border and flee to India. Tajuddin, again, vehemently opposes. He is easily angered by Mushtaque's proposition. Mujib becomes the voice of reason and calms him down, which he is seen doing a lot, much like how Suhrawardy used to do with him. Mujib then proposes that he will remain in his residence in Dhaka and asks the leadership to scatter all over the country to strengthen the war effort. When Mushtaque asks him to leave as well, he holds his ground and says if he leaves, "the army will burn Dhaka to the ground to look for me". This is how he silences Mushtaque yet again and prepares to take one for the team. Mushtaque's cowardice in the face of crisis is toppled by Mujib's steadfast resolution to fight. Tajuddin remains absent for the rest of the movie. No one mentions him again.

The next time the audience sees Mushtaque on screen is when he holds a meeting with Major General Ziaur Rahman, the other villain in the story, to discuss the assassination plan for Mujib. The scene starts with a backshot of Ziaur Rahman, showing him in his khaki uniform and his neatly trimmed military hair. He wears shades throughout the scene and holds a drink in his hand. Mushtaque enters the room with one of his associates. He tries to provoke Ziaur Rahman by saying how he should have been the chief of army, implying that the Mujib administration denied him of the post despite his qualifications. They also refer to the radio announcement General Ziaur Rahman made from a clandestine radio station in the Chittagong district on behalf of Mujib declaring Bangladesh's independence and the War on Pakistani military on March 27, 1971 (Hasan, Mirza & Khondaker, 2009; Riaz, 2016). Mushtaque terms it as the "false independence" and expresses his hopes that "this time, you will be able to declare true independence", implying that true independence will only come if they can remove Mujib out of their way. Ziaur Rahman remains nonchalant and unbothered and has no dialogue in the scene.

In the next scene, Ziaur Rahman is seen attending Mujib's sons' wedding reception with his wife. They bring a replica of a boat (BAL's party symbol) as a symbolic gift for the occasion. The couple is close with Mujib's family, as is hinted at by Mrs. Ziaur Rahman's direct access to Mrs. Mujib. As the Indian delegate requests an audience with Mujib in private, Ziaur Rahman follows then with his eyes. He has a clever, rather subtle villainous smile on his face, and says nothing. This is the last time we see Ziaur Rahman on screen.

The next section will analyze the contents in the prominent scenes where Mujib is not present, to examine how the other actors and elements function in his absence.

Mujib Gets Zero Screen Time: What Does the Absence Say?

One of the prominent scenes in Mujib is absent from the frame comes at 01:30:01, when Mawlana Bhasani's character says earlier in the film in his attempt to relieve Mujib of his sedition charges in 1969, "If you want to save the country, save Mujib first," equating the country's wellbeing with that of Mujib, equating the fate of Mujib with that of the country. At 02:01:00, Mujib's village home in Gopalganj's Tungipara is burned down by the Pakistan military as the war begins in March 1971. His parents are dragged out before the army vandalizes the house, breaks a portrait of Kazi Nazrul Islam, and walks over it before burning the house to the ground. Nazrul Islam is also known as the "rebel" poet for the consistent themes of resistance and rebellion in the face of oppression in his literary work. The breaking of his portrait in a way symbolizes the breaking of the Bengali spirit of resistance as a form of cultural oppression perpetrated on the Bengali population for years.

At 02:02:25, Mujib's sons Kamal and Jamal are seen joining the war effort as a battle song written and composed by Kazi Nazrul Islam plays in the background. They train in the lush green rural landscapes of Bangladesh, symbolizing the hope their youth brings amid the destructions of the war. At 02:03:29, the flag of independent Bangladesh (a red circle, symbolizing the blood and sacrifices of the people. It contains a golden map of Bangladesh against a green background, which again symbolizes the lush green landscape of the region) is seen waving while the national anthem plays in the background. The title of the film materialized in such scenes, where the making of a nation is displayed in the biopic of its leader Mujib.

At 02:04:00, Mrs. Mujib is seen bonding with Painda Khan, a Balouch soldier in charge of keeping Mujib's family captive. She mentions her husband's association with Balouch leader Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan. Mrs. Mujib mentions how Gaffar Khan is a victim of the same

oppressive system that Mujib has fought all his life. The soldier sheds a single drop of tear at the mention of Gaffar Khan, and gratefully receives the food offered to him by Mrs. Mujib on behalf of his company. Mujib, even in his absence, becomes a solace for the oppressed people who don't even speak the same language as him.

The film goes on to show some file footages collected from news pieces and documentaries during the war to show the horror inflicted on the Bengalis by the Pakistani occupation forces. One clip that is shown for a considerable length of time is an interview of India's then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who staunchly supports the cause of Bangladesh throughout the interview. At the advent of independence, Mrs. Mujib shows concerns for her husband, says, "There is no independence without Mujib," echoing the same sentiments expressed by Mawlana Bhasani at 01:30:01.

At 02:17:55, an Indian major comes to escort Mujib's family safely after the Pakistan military surrenders to the joint forces of the Indian army and the "Muktibahini", the Bangladeshi freedom fighters. Painda Khan refuses to surrender to the Indian major. It is Mrs. Mujib who convinces him not to risk his life for his higher ups and lose the chance to see his family again. An emotional Painda Khan surrenders his arms to Mrs. Mujib, who then leads a crowd while taking off the Pakistani flag of the house's terrace, putting up the Bangladeshi flag and joins them in chanting "Joy Bangla".

The next section will focus on scenes where protagonist Mujib is seen with his family members to examine how their ideologies and sacrifices align in the movie.

Mujib: A Family Man

At 20:25, Mujib is seen enjoying some family time with his parents at their village home in Tungipara. They recite Nazrul's poetry together and engage in a heated political debate. Soon after, he gets married to Begum Fazilatunnesa, nicknamed Renu and referred to as Mrs. Mujib throughout this thesis. The newly married couple humbly begin their life in Kolkata, where Mujib remains heavily involved in Muslim League's politics under the mentorship of Suhrawardy and finishes his degree with his wife's encouragement. They are consistently seen breaking conventional South Asian gender roles as they share the workload of household chores together. Arabic calligraphy hangs on the wall of their living room, suggesting the influence of religion in their seemingly liberal lifestyle.

At 52:55, Mujib is brought back to his village home in Tungipara after his near-death experience resulting from the hunger strike in 1952. As he recovers and enjoys his time with his parents, wife, and children, he is summoned back to Dhaka to organize the newly formed Awami Muslim League. Renu is reluctant to let him go. She pleads with her in-laws to convince Mujib to stay out of politics and earn a living in a more conventional occupation. Mujib has full support from his father, who tells his daughter-in-law, "Let me tell you something. There are three things you cannot stop with all your might – a monsoon storm, a deadly flood, and a mad revolutionary." This scene works as a signifier of Mujib's journey as a "revolutionary".

At 01:02:05, Mujib gifts a piece of land to his wife in the heart of Dhaka to build their family home. However, for someone devoted to politics throughout his life, his income sources remain unclear. A business with his younger brother Nasser is mentioned but not elaborated on. It should be noted that Nasser allegedly had massive corruption charges against him post-independence (Mascarenhas, 1986). As they settle in their new house, Mujib is seen engaging in

very hands-on parenting with his children, who grow super attached to him over time despite his limited presence in their life. They hang portraits of Tagore and Nazrul in their living room, much like the Awami League party office setting, suggesting the same cultural values persist within his family as well.

When Mujib's family visit him to prison right before he is charged with sedition, his youngest son Russell puts on a show by chanting the pro-6-point slogans he learnt just from listening to the protesters outside their house. The rest of the family encourages Russell, while his eldest Hasina talks of the active role she played in the student protests in favor of the 6-point demand. The family is portrayed as one that truly believes the political philosophy of its patriarch and is devoted to the cause of Bengali autonomy. Before the visit comes to an end, Mrs. Mujib warns her husband about the Agartala conspiracy case in advance, in which Mujib is later accused of sedition and treason for allegedly conspiring against Pakistan by planning a secession from West Pakistan (Ahmed, 2016; Mahmud, 1997) and asks him to stay vigilant.

Mrs. Mujib is portrayed as a constant political counsel to her husband throughout the film, a role that remains unmentioned in historical accounts, even in Mujib's memoirs (Rahman, 2012; Rahman, 2017). When he calls his wife from Rawalpindi after a meeting with General Ayub Khan and tells her that the General has asked him to be the prime minister (01:35:20), Mrs. Mujib replies, "He [Ayub] cannot decide that for the people. Only the people should have the power to decide that in a democracy." This again goes on to show how their ideologies and commitment to democracy were aligned throughout their lives.

At 02:24:50, Mujib's nephew Sheikh Moni slams the print media for criticizing Mujib's formation of BAKSAL and terming it as a move towards fascism. He suggests shutting down all the critical newspapers, to which Mujib angrily responds, "Do you want the country to turn into

Pakistan?", expressing his staunch support for press freedom even at the face of criticism. It is Mrs. Mujib who calms them down and suggests bringing experienced leaders like Mawlana Bhasani under the umbrella of BAKSAL. However, what remains absent in both the scene and the subsequent narration is the fact that multiple newspapers were indeed shut down after the formation of BAKSAL under the Mujib administration (Mohaimen, 2024).

Every time Mujib's family was seen on the screen, the background mostly showcased a warm color palette (except the final assassination scene) in natural lighting. All the actors playing different family members consistently maintained a beige/white palette with their costumes, suggesting an aura of simplicity and purity in their characters.

The Final Moments

At 02:36:28, the family receives a phone call from Mujib's sister in the middle of the night on August 15, 1975, whose panic-stricken voice informs them that their family came under attack. She also informs that her husband and Mujib's brother-in-law, Abdur Rab Serniabat, also a member of the parliament, has been shot. Soon after, the army attacks their house. As Mujib and his brother Nasser frantically call those in charge of the president's security protocol, Sheikh Kamal mistakes the assassinators for help from the military and is soon shot dead. Jamal hides with his wife and his sister-in-law and is shot dead in an attempt to protect them. The two women are brought out in front of Jamal's dead body and shot dead without a chance to mourn him. Sheikh Nasser follows their fate soon after.

Mujib remains valiant while facing one of the shooters, who falters in front of his dismissive attitude towards their coup attempt. Mujib tells the shooter that he knows him through his father who is a BAL activist from Kushtia (a southern district in Bangladesh). He tries to drag

on the conversation when another shooter comes in and shoots him multiple times. Mujib's iconic glasses fall from his face, while his blood-soaked body takes a fall on the stairs as well. Mrs. Mujib rushes towards her husband and is dragged away and shot on the spot.

Meanwhile, a domestic worker tries to hide 10-year-old Russell under a staircase, who is persistent on his need to go see his parents right away. The assassinators soon catch them as well, drag Russell to his parents' dead body and shoots him without sparing a thought. The camera zooms in on the dead bodies of each family member, the blood more prominent on their white/beige toned clothing, while a song plays in the background in acapella. The lyrics represent the betrayal Mujib faced from his own people whom he trusted with his life. Bullets are scattered all over the house. A table, a few papers scattered on the table and the ground, and two landline telephone sets are shown blood stained. The long shot ends with a zoom in on Mujib's lifeless face, moves to a crane shot of his mausoleum in Tungipara, where the tombstone says, "Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Father of the nation, Birth: 20 March 1920, Martyred: 15 August 1975).

The movie does not really build up to the final moment where Mujib is assassinated with his family members, except for the scene where Mushtaque meets Ziaur Rahman, the warnings from the Indian delegate and Mrs. Mujib's subsequent concerns. It does not account for the nuances of an intricately complicated political climate leading up to the event of the assassination. The assassination scenes focus more on the brutality of the event and rushes to attribute martyrdom to the deceased.

Hasina: A Daughter's Tale (2018)

The 01:04:23 long documentary has been analyzed scene by scene, with 36 of the scenes being analyzed. The analysis led the scenes to be divided into 7 key themes. These themes include: scenes where sisters Hasina and Rehana (the sole survivors of the 1975 coup from the Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's immediate family) seem fairly candid, sharing family memories with the interviewer (under the subhead "A Glimpse into the Lives of Hasina and Rehana"); scenes where Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is the prime focus through old footages, photographs and narrations by the sisters (under "Memories of their Father"); scenes were the sisters talk about the 1975 assassination of their family and the subsequent struggles (under "A Traumatic Chapter: the 1975 Coup and Subsequent Events"); scenes where Hasina shares some significant details about her political career (under "The Prodigal Daughter: Mapping Sheikh Hasina's Political Career"); scenes where the "villains" in the story, i.e. Khondaker Mushtaque Ahmed and General Ziaur Rahman, are mentioned (under "Portrayal of the Villains"); scenes were the sisters talk about their "roots" (under "Staying True to their Roots"); and the closing sequences (under "Redemption and Ending"). The analysis does not exactly follow the chronology of events as presented in the film. Rather, it follows the themes and puts the scenes under each theme in the chronological order of events as presented in the film.

The opening scene of the documentary does a brilliant job of setting the tone right for the rest of the documentary. Set against a heavy and ominous background score, edited parts of different speeches made by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and visuals of different mementos (For example, the letters written by him, a buzzing typewriter producing the 1975 Indemnity Ordinance on paper, newspaper clippings of showing the news of the 1975 coup), Hasina and Rehana narrate the grief and trauma of losing their family in a violent coup. Rehana talks about a

recurring nightmare where she sees herself and her sister being chased by unknown assassins with knives and her disbelief over the fact that her father was killed in his country by his people, while Hasina talks about the Ordinance and how it barred them from getting justice for their family's murder. These disjointed narratives with the opening credits give the audience a brief overview of what is about to come in the rest of the documentary. In the next section, the thesis discusses the sequences where the two sisters candidly share their family memories on camera. While both Hasina and Rehana appear on the screen in such scenes, Hasina is given more screen time and narration, as is obvious from the title of the documentary.

A Glimpse into the Lives of Hasina and Rehana

Right after the opening scene, Hasina is seen entering her kitchen at *Gonobhobon* (the official residence of the premier) with her two grandkids (01:47). We see a candid Hasina, not the prime minister but a loving grandmother in the comforts of her home and cooking for her family, while talking about her mother's cooking, her father's favorite food, and asking the crew to share the meal with her and her family at *Gonobhobon.* She wears a white shari, glasses, and a pair of small earrings. She covers her almost white hair, like any other elderly woman in the country. She is simple and down-to-earth in her demeanor. The documentary crew calls the prime minister of the *"Apa"*, which means "sister" in Bangla. She is not much for grandiose when it comes to addressing or even interacting with her. It's as if the crew was interacting with an old friend or an elderly family member, who shares tales from her bygone memories. She is seen surrounded by family members at any given point in time.

At 03:48, the two sisters face the camera together for the first time. Both sisters wear white sharis, glasses and cover their heads. Rehana shows an old photo of their mother when she was pregnant with her second child, Kamal. A piano instrumental of "*Purano shei din er kotha"*,

a popular Tagore song, evoking nostalgia and a reminiscence of lost memories, plays in the background.

A photo from Hasina's youth shows her wearing a white shari with black borders, flaunting her long, lush, black hair, while Rehana talks about how lazy Hasina used to be in her younger years. The scene cuts to Hasina working at her office, flipping through documents while holding a pen, as if to show her transformation from her carefree youthful days to assuming the responsibilities of BAL and the country.

At 23:30, the two sisters are seen walking on the lawn of *Gonobhobon.* They talk about how they never wanted to live here leaving their house at Dhanmondi 32 in Dhaka, even when their father was the premier. Their father never wanted to live without his family, so he also stayed at Dhanmondi 32, denying the luxury and protection of state-provided accommodation for the premier.

The two sisters are seen spending some quality time with their grandchildren. They also ask them to say *"Joy Bangla, Joy Bangabandhu"* in front of the camera, further connecting the future generations of their family with the ideologies they preach and practice, and one that glorifies their predecessor. This was a theme found in *"Mujib: The Making of a Nation"* as well, with the scenes featuring Hasina and Rehana's youngest brother Sheikh Russell.

This implication is even more strengthened when the sequence cuts to Russell's photos and video footage from Hasina and Rehana's grandchildren. The two sisters talk about how Russell was loved by everyone in the family for being the youngest and had a strong personality at that very young age. The audience sees photos of Russell with his father, wearing similar clothes as him. One black and white photo is particularly striking, where the father-son duo is

seen standing on a bridge, wearing similar clothes. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman lovingly looks at his youngest son while talking to him, while Russell tries to look beyond the river that the bridge stands on. Every family member's connection with the patriarch is highlighted either through narration or visuals or both.

At 26:40, the two sisters talk about their brother Kamal's wedding to athlete Sultana Ahmed, nicknamed Khuki. They talk about how their relatives frowned upon the idea of a daughter-in-law being an athlete as the broader Bangladeshi society was still conservative during the early seventies. The two sisters convinced her mother to let Khuki progress in her career after the marriage. The matriarch willingness agrees, suggesting the family's liberal views and dedication towards empowering the women in the family. Their other brother, Jamal, was married shortly after Kamal, which the sisters term as the "only proper celebration they had together as a family", as their lives were thrown into one struggle after another after the two brothers' weddings.

At 30:20, Hasina is seen playing badminton with her son Sazeeb Wazed Joy and her grandchildren. Hasina talks about her regret of not spending enough time with her children while they were growing up because of her dedication to politics, hinting towards yet another sacrifice she had to make in her personal life for the country. At 50:20, Rehana talks about how she singlehandedly made the decision to send Hasina's children to a boarding school in Nainital, India, so they could get proper education. Hasina was under house arrest at that time when Rehana took the children to the boarding school. "I don't think anyone could be as cruel as I was to my sister at that time. I watched tears rolling down her face while I hurried her kids to get into the car. I will never forget that face of hers," says Rehana, highlighting the sacrifices made by Hasina as a mother.

Towards the end of the documentary, the narratives come to a full circle when at 1:00:14, Rehana says, “We always shared everything with our mother. I wish I could tell her that her first-born is not that lazy a girl anymore! She left her lazy corner in her room a long time ago,” suggesting a full transformation of Sheikh Hasina from a young woman who only wanted to read and listen to music in her room to the president of a major political party in Bangladesh and the country’s prime minister. Rehana’s statement is a culmination of their struggles, ordeals, achievements.

In the next section, the thesis focuses on the memories of their father shared by the two sisters in the documentary, while attempting to explore their father’s influence in their lives and the politics they preach and practice.

Memories of Their Father

The presence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is prominent throughout the documentary either through narrations, or visuals like audios/videos of his rallies and speeches surrounded by huge crowds (referring to his popularity), interviews, and old photographs at work or with his family. His iconic accessories like the black coat, glasses, and pipes are also prominently placed within such visuals, appealing to his cult of personality. However, what makes his presence more interesting is the narrative of his two daughters regarding his political career.

Going back to 04:55, this theme is made more evident when we see a waving Bangladesh flag with a piano instrumental of the national anthem playing in the background, while Hasina talks through these visuals and music about her father’s political wisdom and his thoughtfully made political decisions. “Bangladesh did not become independent that easily,” is the next thing she says. She does not mention the contribution of the freedom fighters, martyrs of the 1971 war,

or even her father's political colleagues or associates at all, attributing the sole credit of Bangladesh's independence on her father. This attribution is an overarching narrative of the politics of Sheikh Hasina and BAL as a whole and can also be considered an element of the cult of Mujibism. At 11:10, Hasina points to a room in their Dhanmondi 32 residence (later turned into a museum), with an old telephone, some files, and a box and mentions that this was from where her father declared Bangladesh's independence on March 26, 1971.

The two sisters talk about their father's deep involvement with the family despite his difficult and extremely busy political career. They talk about the bond and love their parents shared with visuals of Mr. Rahman's letters to his wife. They talk about his days in prison and the struggles they had to endure together as a family in those days -- sacrificing their safety and the joy of their father's company from a very young age -- in an attempt to evoke a strong emotion in their audience. At 15:00, Hasina also describes her family's feeling of ecstasy, relief, and joy after her father's return in an independent Bangladesh from captivity in Pakistan on January 10, 1972. "It was the most precious moment of our lives," said Hasina in a quivering voice, while an acapella version of BAL's theme played in the background, attempting to evoke the same ecstasy in the audience as well.

The next section discusses how the 1975 coup is described by the two sisters and their narrative surrounding the events.

A Traumatic Chapter: The 1975 Coup and Subsequent Events

The narrations surrounding the 1975 coup reflects the two sisters' lifelong longing for justice for their family. Going back to 17:35, this theme is made more evident when Hasina talks about the Indemnity Ordinance of 1975 and how it barred the culprits of the coup from being

brought to justice, “The whole country cries for justice when a woman is killed, or a child is killed. A child died on August 15, 1975, along with so many women and the president of the country. And yet the murderers roamed free in different countries, some even on diplomatic missions, all with political protection,” says Hasina.

Rehana's narrative, however, is more centered on vengeance. She remembers reading *“A Tale of Two Cities”* by Charles Dickens during their exiled years in India, where two sisters avenge the murder of their family and keep count of everyone they kill while crocheting. “I wanted to do something like this. And I told my sister not to stop me. She was the one who told me to stay calm,” said Rehana. She also remembers scribbling right next to Hasina’s grocery list during their exiled years in India, “God, I don’t know why you have still kept us alive. But I promise I'll find my family’s murderers and bring them to justice, *inn shaa Allah* (God willing, an Arabic phrase frequently used by Muslims),” signing her name underneath with the exact date. Hasina saved that piece of paper all those years, showing the same commitment to Rehana’s cause.

Rehana's narration is used as yet another tool to glorify Hasina’s character as someone who is beyond the idea of vengeance and focused on the idea of justice – a characteristic of a righteous leader. Hasina continues the narrative by mentioning how everyone advised her to formulate a special law or tribunal to bring the assassins to justice when she assumed the prime minister’s office in 1996, but she refused. “I wanted to get justice for my family as a common citizen of the country, with the help of already existing laws,” she says, positioning herself with the common people of the country, seeking justice from an emotional and ethical standpoint.

There is a substantial amount of dramatization in Hasina and Rehana’s narrative regarding the 1975 coup. Rehana talks about being invited to a candlelight dinner in Belgium

with Hasina, her husband and children on August 14, 1975, and having a wonderful time with their hosts. It was still very early in the morning of August 15 when they got a phone call informing them of the coup in Bangladesh. “There was something off about the way the phone rang that night, like it was bad news. I heard about the coup, and the first thing that came to my mind was that no one in my family is alive...I could not tell Rehana. I went to her room, lied down beside her on the bed, and hugged her...from that day onwards, I cannot stay calm when I hear the phone ringing,” said Hasina. The two sisters also talk about how their hosts in Belgium were suddenly too eager to get rid of them, and how they crossed the border with the help of a Bangladeshi diplomat posted in Germany, who later made the arrangements for them to seek asylum in India as per India’s then prime minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s request.

The narration is further dramatized by close shots of the Sheikh family’s residence in Dhaka’s Dhanmondi 32 in lowkey lighting accompanied by sounds and visuals of a ticking wall clock, telephone ringing, rain, a sequence of gunshots, photos of the deceased, snippets from Mujib’s interviews and speeches, and pin drop silence. Hasina sits on a chair in that silence, takes her glasses off, and wipes her tears. She is then seen walking on the corridors of Dhanmondi 32, taking a good look at the portraits of her deceased family members under lowkey lighting, evoking strong personal emotions of loss and grief.

During their exiled years in India, the two sisters talk about navigating through the emotional turmoil of losing their family, settling in a new country amid various uncertainties, the cultural shocks, and an eroding sense of identity. Mrs. Gandhi arranged a job for Hasina’s husband Dr. Wazed in the atomic commission and a two-bedroom apartment for them in Delhi’s defense colony. To ensure their safety, they had to change their names as well. “This was extremely painful for us. We lost our family, our home, left our country, and now had to get rid

of our names and identities as well. I wanted to leave India and go home, but we did not have the luxury to act on such impulses," says Rehana (41:50).

Meanwhile, Hasina glorifies Mrs. Gandhi through her personal experiences with her. "When I went to see her during a scheduled visit, I remember her seeing my face and saying, "You look so tired! Come have breakfast with me," and went on to serve me toast, omelet, and tea herself. Her affection was deeply reassuring. I knew I had her watching over my family, and I knew I had an ally in her, just how Bangladesh did in 1971," highlighting India's cooperation and commitment to the cause of Bangladesh as well.

The next two sequences can be interpreted as the contextualization of Hasina's debut in politics, through glorifying narratives of her father's political career, her concern for her country during the exile, and yet another mythical personal experience. For example, at 46:40, Hasina talks about how she constantly thought about Bangladesh's plight while in exile. "My father liberated the country," she says, again solely attributing Bangladesh's independence to her father. "...He wanted democracy and the welfare of the people. But Bangladesh turned into a kingdom of murderers after his demise," she adds, equating democracy and welfare with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in an extended manifestation of the Mujibist ideology.

At 47:23, she describes her visit with Rehana to Sufi preacher Nizamuddin's shrine on April 9, 1981. While they sat praying, a resident Sufi of the shrine brought the registrar book to them, a specific page of which was open. "We saw Abba's (father in Bangla) signature on that page. The most astonishing part was the date beside his signature. April 9, 1946. He was here on the same day as us, even before our birth! We covered our head while entering the shrine, so there was no way anyone could recognize us," says Hasina. On screen, Hasina's name is displayed on a registrar, signed as Hasina S. Wazed, dated April 9, 1981. This was clearly a

dramatization technique consciously adopted by the director to add more to the storytelling, as Rehana mentioned earlier that they went by different names during their exiled years. This mythical coincidence inspired Hasina to go back to Bangladesh, "I finally gathered the courage to go back home and do something for my country," she says, as if that would be her ultimate redemption as the protagonist of the story, the successor in this daughter's tale. And so she does, when BAL elects her as the president of the party in 1981.

The next section will analyze Sheikh Hasina's political career in her own narration and explore the key themes – her father's influence in her career and political philosophy, her sacrifices for the country, her quest for justice for her family, and the anti-BNP rhetoric.

The "Prodigal" Daughter: Mapping Sheikh Hasina's Political Career

The first time Hasina mentions her political career without mentioning her father or their party's influence is at 04:38, when she talks about her involvement in student politics in the 1960s. She also passingly mentions that she was elected the vice president for the student union at her college; however, she could never imagine leading a huge political party like BAL. Hasina is seen wearing a slightly more glamorous attire at a work event, escorted by an army official and her nephew and Rehana's son Redwan Siddique, and socializing with guests as she talks about her lack of political ambition from the beginning.

At 10:19, the audience gets a closer glimpse of the Dhanmondi 32 residence of the Sheikh family in Dhaka, later turned into a museum. We can see a portrait of Tagore hanging on one wall, while two photos of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's hang on the other under a pair of lights. With his first speech after coming back to an independent Bangladesh playing in the background, the audience sees Hasina walking alone on the terrace, as though suggesting her solo journey in a

country riddled with difficult political equations, as the daughter and successor of the nation's founding father.

At 18:13, Hasina mentions how the *"Joy Bangla"* slogan was practically banned when she came back to the country in 1981 after her long exile in India. She mentions that BNP's "goons" would attack anyone chanting *"Joy Bangla"* indiscriminately, highlighting the undemocratic nature of the party founded by General Ziaur Rahman.

At 19:00, while talking about the anti-autocracy movement in 1987, Hasina mentions a particular encounter with one Noor Hossain, who went on become a symbol of resistance against autocracy. Ali Riaz (2016) in his book *"Bangladesh: A Political History Since Independence"* aptly contextualizes the symbolism of Noor Hossain:

> "Noor Hossain is a very common name in Bangladesh. But very few Noor Hossains are part of the history of the nation's quest for democracy. One Noor Hossain, a 26-year-old who had only attended school up to eighth grade, and had just learnt to drive, took his place in the nation's history on 10 November 1987. It was a day when the opposition parties called the 'Dhaka Blockade', demanding the resignation of the military ruler General H. M. Ershad. As the morning progressed, millions thronged the roads of the capital. Among them was Noor Hossain, son of Mujibur Rahman and Marium Bibi, a member of the local chapter of the youth wing of the AL. He had no shirt on; instead two slogans were written across his bare chest and back, 'down with autocracy' and 'let democracy be freed'. Marked with bold white letters, chanting slogans fearlessly, he was easily spotted by photographers. But soon after his picture was taken he was shot and killed by the police near the center of the capital. In that moment he was immortalized and the pictures, depicting the rallying cry of the nation, 'let democracy be freed',

became the public symbol of the struggle. If there is any single picture that epitomizes the aspiration of the Bangladeshi population for democracy, it is the picture of Noor Hossain." (p. 109)

Hasina's encounter with Noor Hossain is dramatic and quite emotional. She remembers a shirtless Noor Hossain with slogans written on his body walking with a crowd right beside her car on November 10, 1987. She remembers calling him and asking him to put a shirt on so he would not be spotted and shot by the police. "He held my hand and asked for my blessings. "I'm willing to sacrifice my life for democracy," he said. I told him that he had to live. The next moment, there was an explosion right beside my car; maybe I was the target. It was utter chaos all around, we could not make anything out of it. Noor Hossain was shot dead. My fears came true," says Hasina, pauses, and looks directly at the camera.

This documentary was released in 2018; the first half of that eventful year was all about two major student movements – the quota reform movement and the road safety movement (run mostly by middle and high school students). Amid increased censorship and the subsequent careful criticism of the government's role in culling the movements and muzzling the voices of dissent with the draconian Digital Security Act (2018), it is particularly interesting how the protagonist establishes a connection with the person behind the widely accepted symbol of democracy and resistance. It seems like a conscious attempt to bypass the controversial role her government and administration played in recent times by elevating or distancing herself and her stance on democracy from her own political actions. Her later coalition with Ershad's party also remains unmentioned. Noor Hossain, in this narrative, is nothing more than a prop to highlight Hasina's larger-than-life and dedicated-to-democracy persona.

At 20:45, photos of Hasina attending political rallies and addressing assemblies are displayed on the screens. The attempts at portraying Hasina as a pro-people leader is evident in her subsequent narration. “I had nowhere else to go, so I went back to my people. The love they have showered me with is unparalleled,” she says. “I went to conduct relief work after a flood to a remote village. We had to walk a long way as the roads were not fit for transportation. An old woman came to welcome me, gave me coconut water to drink, and asked me to rest at her place for a while. “Your father has worked so hard for us all his life, and now you’re doing the same thing,” she told me. I consider this love the greatest achievement of my life,” added Hasina.

This narration is particularly interesting considering how it draws a parallel between the political persona of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his successor. A similar scene can be found in *Mujib: The Making of A Nation (2023*) featuring Mujib as well, highlighting his popularity with the people. Earlier, when Hasina describes her father’s tireless dedication to connect to his people with clips of her father addressing the crowd from the balcony of Dhanmondi 32 (10:19), there is a subtle attempt at connecting the political philosophies of the father-daughter duo through their seemingly people-centric mindset. With such narratives, Hasina is not merely her father’s daughter and rightful successor, instead, she becomes the daughter of the entire country in this daughter’s tale.

At 23:38, Hasina and Rehana talk about their horrifying memories of the grenade attack during a BAL assembly in Dhaka on August 21, 2004 (while BNP was in power), accompanied by file footage and newspaper cutouts of the event. In one of the cutouts, the headline suggests that Hasina finds the government responsible for the attack. The sound effects are equally harrowing, going from the *“Purano shei din er kotha”* instrumental, to sounds of explosions, *azaan* (the Muslim call for prayer), and screams, adding the undertone of the doomsday. Hasina

passingly mentions that two of the culprits of the 1975 assassination, Majors Dalim and Rashid, were in Bangladesh at that time, and insinuates BNP's role in supporting them, "We know who supported them politically and financially at that time."

At 52:05, she talks about losing access to their Dhanmondi 32 residence to the government after returning to Bangladesh in 1981. "I could not even perform the last rites for my family. I had to do it on the streets," Hasina mentions. It was such an emotionally turbulent time when she had to organize a party that had been in shambles since 1975. This is an interesting commentary on the state of Bangladeshi politics as well because it highlights the country's nepotistic political culture; BAL needed the Sheikh name to reunite and organize under the party umbrella. She is shown as "the chosen one", the only one who could get things back on track, for both her party and the country.

Hasina is also steadfast in her commitment to democracy and putting an end to the bloodshed that the country experienced in a saga of the continued coups and countercoups post 1975. "I was very clear in my speeches on the fact that I did not wish to see any more bloodshed in the country, particularly in the army cantonments. I wanted to restore democracy," this, according to her, was a bold and controversial statement in that political climate when the country was under military rule. "Everyone advised me against it, but I went with it anyway," she adds. However, the BDR mutiny, yet another bloodshed in the cantonment right after she assumed office in 2009, is not mentioned. It seems as if all the controversial events during her tenure are being avoided in the narrative on purpose.

At 54:00, Hasina discusses the unexpected defeat she faced in the 1991 elections. Rehana, on the other hand, glorifies her sister's political career by addressing Hasina's courage and resilience. "All my sister had at that point was courage and honesty. To this day, she has no

fear or greed. There was really nothing for us to fear after 1975," she says, elevating her sister's persona to through this mythic touch to her character.

Hasina's anti-BNP rhetoric is evident in yet another sequence when she narrates the events surrounding the verdict of the case filed against her family's assassins. She talks about how the case made no progress during the BNP era. When Justice Ghulam Rasul was all set to give the verdict in 2009 after BAL came to power, she mentions the difficulties he had to go through, "BNP called a strike on the last day of the case's hearing, so Justice Rasul would not go to the court to announce the verdict. His family's safety was also compromised. It was through sheer courage and resilience that he showed up and read the verdict." It took 35 years for the Sheikhs to ensure justice for their family. The documentary ends with a pan shot through the articles of the Dhanmondi 32 museum. It also mentions some information about the convicted assassins, "Out of the twelve convicted killers who received the death sentence, six are still alive today. Two of the killers are absconding in Canada and the US. The whereabouts of four others are unknown." This reminds the audience that the justice the two sisters fought for throughout their lives remains elusive.

The next section will analyze a few more sequences when Khondaker Mushtaque Ahmed and General Ziaur Rahman are mentioned in the two sister's narratives, and how it further propels a "righteous vs evil" dichotomy throughout the documentary.

Portrayal of the Villains

Two names repeatedly come up when the sisters, particularly Hasina, talk about her father's adversaries and the people responsible for the coup – Khondaker Mushtaque Ahmed, a senior BAL leader, and General Ziaur Rahman, former president of Bangladesh and the founding

chair of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The first time their involvement in the 1975 coup is hinted at 09:27, when Rehana talks about her mother's fears and anxieties post-independence. "They won't let us be," her mother used to say; however, neither sister mentioned who their mother was referring to. On the other hand, Hasina states that her father was aware of Mushtaque's intentions, political ambitions, and the extent to which he was willing to go to make those ambitions a reality. "After Uncle Tajuddin [Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's close associate and confidant, and the first prime minister of the country who served in the wartime government] left the party, my father was visibly upset. To console him, I told him not to worry as he still had Uncle Mushtaque by his side," says Hasina. However, her father's response was not that positive. "Do you even know Mushtaque? He will be the first one to stab me on my chest if given the chance," Sheikh Mujibur Rahman told her eldest daughter, according to her narration (09:33). Hasina points out how important this statement was as it goes on to show that her father could predict who might be the ones conspiring against him from his own camp. The narration is followed by appropriate visual cues containing photos of Mujib and Tajuddin, followed by those of Mujib and Mushtaque. However, Hasina does not shed any light on the internal conflicts within BAL and her father's role in such conflicts that led to Tajuddin's retirement from politics altogether.

At 28:00, Hasina mentions how their door was always open to anyone and everyone coming to visit them and their father, naming a few people associated with the assassination. For example, she mentions how Major Nur was always at their place as he was posted in the military with Sheikh Kamal, and Major Dalim's wife and mother-in-law staying at their place for entire days at a stretch. She also mentions General Ziaur Rahman and his wife's access to their family, as is hinted in *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* (2023) as well. This narration also works as a

testimony to their family's simplistic nature and open-mindedness, for which they let everyone in without a doubt and denied state-provided accommodation and protection for the premier and his family. This testimony also effectively establishes Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family victims of the villains of their story, elevates their status as martyrs.

In the closing sequences, it is mentioned that General Ziaur Rahman ratified the Indemnity Ordinance to the Indemnity Act in 1979. This choice of information provided is also deliberate as it highlights and establishes General Ziaur Rahman's role and holds him equally responsible for the coup.

The next section will discuss the essence of the documentary's final scenes.

Redemption and Ending

At 56:12, Hasina talks about her emotions when the verdict punishing her family's assassins came. She talks about going back to their old residence in Dhanmondi 32 and standing in front of the tree by the main entrance from where "my father's soul left his body." The two sisters are seen on the staircase of the house, standing underneath a painting of their father with a bucket of rose petals, which they spread on the stairs where their father was shot. A melancholic devotional song by Pannalal Bhattyacharya plays in the background, which Hasina mentions her father listening to after coming back to an independent country earlier in the documentary. The two sisters, both dressed in white sharis with black borders and black mourning badges on their chests, sit on the ground underneath the stairs, say a short prayer and leave the spot. Devjyoti Mishra's compelling musical arrangements are befitting of the mood and succeeds in evoking the right emotional responses throughout the documentary. It is as if Hasina's entire life's work culminated at that very moment when she ensured justice for her family.

This is followed by a brief biography of the deceased in the August 15 coup. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's wife and Sheikh Hasina's mother, Sheikh Fazilatunnesa Renu is described as a "lady known for her immense strength and simplicity. She was the pillar of the fortitude that kept her family united through the many years her husband was in and out of jail for his political activism" (1:00:55). The *"Purano shei din er kotha"* instrument plays in the background, ending the documentary on a bittersweet yet nostalgic note, attributing martyrdom to the deceased and glorifying their lives till the last second.

The next section discusses how the two sisters attribute a greater significance to their birthplace Tungipara and its implications in the broader narrative.

Staying True to the Roots

The two sisters continue to put increased emphasis on the importance of staying true to their roots. They talk about their spiritual connection to Tungipara, a small village in Bangladesh's Gopalganj district, where they were born and brought up. Tungipara is also the birthplace of their father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. This theme is first illustrated at 06:50, the audience is exposed to the scenic views with Bengal's usual lush green landscape in Tungipara through two small, black windows of a boat. We get to see ducks on the bank of a river, a woman in a plain shari washing dishes, fishermen catching fish on their boat, an old man walking with an umbrella; scenes that connect the people of the land to mother nature, eventually, the narrator(s) to both.

"I come from a village called Tungipara, and I'm very proud of it," says Rehana at 25:40 while sitting on the balcony of *Gonobhobon* in the country's capital. At 25:48, Rehana's statement is followed by striking visuals from Tungipara, along with captivating background

music. The two sisters share their childhood memories in Tungipara. “I feel like I’m back to where I belong, with my people, whenever I’m in Tungipara,” says Hasina.

At 58:47, Hasina says, “I was born and brought up in a village, in an open environment. Maybe that’s why I don’t have that much to fear...this village [Tungipara] is my life. My plan is to come live here again after I retire.” She is seen candidly getting on a rickshaw van (a three-wheeler with wooden boards as passenger seats) with her children and grandchildren), saying she is used to riding them. These statements, again, connect them with their birthplace within the country, portray their down-to-earth and true-to-roots nature, and establish their upbringing in Tungipara as a source of their resilience.

The focus on the two sisters’ attachment to Tungipara does two things. First, it shows how connected they are to their roots, adding to their down-to-earth persona. Second, it mythologizes or glorifies yet another thing (or rather, place) associated with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Sheikh Hasina as well. The mythical element is added with a conscious attempt at portraying Tungipara, a village with regular rural Bangladeshi landscape, as one of the most beautiful places in the country through wide shots, vibrant colors, slow motion takes, and compelling background music (for example, using the piano instrumental of Tagore’s *“Purano shei din er kotha”* yet again). This portrayal of Tungipara attributes a greater status to the place not only as the birthplace of the nation’s founding father but also his successor and first-born daughter Sheikh Hasina.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The thesis uncovers the dominant ideology present in the fictional biopic of Bangladesh’s founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and a documentary based on the life of its former prime

minister Sheikh Hasina, Rahman's daughter and political successor. It also considered Bangladesh's political history to examine these two films as BAL's propaganda tools and the ideology portrayed in them through a retelling of history. Ideological criticism inspires a reader of any artifact to look beyond the surface of the present elements and identify the meanings suggested through said elements (Foss, 2018). By employing a modified version of Foss's (2018) method, this thesis found these two films to be an attempt to push a linear and one-sided historical narrative by contextualizing them in Bangladesh's political landscape, one that has been marred by censorship to muzzle alternative narratives since its inception (Mohaimen, 2024). The thesis investigated how these two films serve as BAL's political propaganda through their portrayal of the heroes and the villains in their stories, and the nuances of the country's political history that remain conveniently absent in them.

The analysis reveals that both films highlight Mujib's lifelong commitment to democracy, secularism, socialism, and Bengali nationalism. They also portray Mujib as the mastermind and auteur behind the struggle for Bengali autonomy, Bangladesh's war of independence, and the very idea of Bangladesh as an independent state with a distinct cultural and linguistic identity. Both films also take on a pro-India narrative by focusing on India's contribution in Bangladesh's war of independence and sheltering the Sheikh sisters after the 1975 coup. This pro-India narrative was pushed by the films at a time of growing discontent over the Hasina regime's submissive foreign policy with India (Mustafa, 2024).

To specifically answer the first research question, the one ideology that was dominant in both films was Mujibism. This ideology is based on four basic pillars – democracy, secularism, socialism, and Bengali nationalism – also the four pillars of Bangladesh's first constitution formulated in 1972. The ideology is not based on any written literature or scholarly work of

Mujib himself. It was propagated by Mujib's followers and a section of BAL post-independence as an extension of Mujib's cult of personality (Ruud, 2022), to counter a pro-socialist narrative within a faction of BAL, which later exited the party and formed *Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal* (National Socialist Party) (Ahmed, 2014; Riaz, 2016).

Mujibism as an extension of Mujib's cult of personality was further strengthened during the last 16 years of BAL rule through singularity, anomalous agency, emotional connection, and protection of Mujib's reputation by legal and social taboos (Taves, 2012). Ruud (2022) also writes about the aspect of singularity in the cult of Mujibism,

> "In his persona, Bangabandhu [Mujib] represented the making of the nation, not just metaphysically but the very practical act of state-making and of shaping the state, its constitution and the structure of its political life. The nation was born because of him, founded by him, and its earliest history marked by him." (p.536)

These sentiments are reflected in Mujib's portrayal in his 2023 biopic in relation to the political climate of the periods shown in the film. He is equated with the making of a nation, as is suggested by the title of the film. Both *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* (2023) and *Hasina: A Daughter's Tale* (2018) also single Mujib out as "out of the ordinary" when it comes to his place in history and his political contributions, righteousness, resilience, oratory and vision (Ruud, 2022). This gives a larger-than-life quality and anomalous agency (Taves, 2012) to his character, using iconic motifs such as his black coat, glasses, smoking pipe, and attributing an important mythical status to his village home in Gopalganj's Tungipara and family residence in Dhaka's Dhanmondi 32 by association. It also attempts to establish an emotional connection (Taves, 2012) between Mujib and his people through his pro-people portrayal in the film. However, such an overly glorified, linear, and one-dimensional portrayal of Mujib misses out on the opportunity

of portraying such a compelling political character through a more real, complex, and nuanced lens.

In *Hasina: A Daughter's Tale* (2018), Mujib's influence throughout Hasina's political career is very evident. Hasina also attributes the sole credit of Bangladesh's independence to her father in her narration, giving singularity and anomalous agency to Mujib as part of his cult of personality (Taves, 2012). In the documentary, parallels are drawn between Hasina and her father's political career in their commitment to democracy, secularism, socialism, and Bengali nationalism, the four pillars of Mujibism. Their political careers are also a testament of their personal sacrifices for their people, which also attempts to create an emotional lien between Hasina and the people of her country using her father's influence and persona. Hasina's archetypal portrayal of losing her family, going on to fulfill her father's dreams by joining politics, and ensuring justice for her family is laden with mythical retellings of her familial and political life to establish her reputation as her father's worthy successor.

Returning to the second research question, both films contribute to BAL regime's stronghold on power by portraying Mujib's political contributions from a solely BAL-centric lens, establishing a BAL hegemony over the historical narratives surrounding Bangladesh's birth, and eventually, positioning their rule as legitimate by virtue of their political contributions. For example, they ignore the contributions of other political entities, such as leftist student organizations, who vehemently protested the sedition charges against him in 1969 and put forward an 11-point demand including Mujib's 6 points. The 11 points included multiple pro-people and socialist demands in 1969's political climate – such as the nationalization of all banks, tax redemption for farmers and peasants, and fair wages and employee bonuses for

industrial workers – garnering further support for the mass uprising against General Ayub Khan's military regime (Riaz, 2016).

And thus, the politics of biopics, in the case of the two films discussed in this thesis, is also the politics of erasure to a great extent. What was essentially a people's struggle against oppression and brutality (Ahmed, 2016) was narrowed into BAL's intellectual property through the enforcement of the party's hegemony over the narratives surrounding the liberation war of 1971. Even during the war, Bangladesh Liberation Front (BLF), a faction of freedom fighters led by student leaders of BAL, including Mujib's nephew Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni, vehemently opposed the inclusion of left-leaning youth in the armed struggle for independence, refused to follow the military high command, and was involved in multiple incidents of infighting over the supply of ammunition to ensure BAL's authority over the war efforts (Hasan, Mirza, and Khondaker, 2009; Ahmed, 2016). BAL also refused to be a part of a 5-party war council convened by Mawlana Bhasani (Ahmed, 2016). There were at least 12,000 communist freedom fighters who fought the 1971 liberation war – with support from the wartime prime minister Tajuddin Ahmed, sector commander Major Khaled Mosharraf, and Commander-in-Chief Colonel Osmani – who were never mentioned in BAL's narratives regarding the war (Ahmed, 2016). These erasures also strengthen the propagandist nature of the fictional biopic. The documentary no different. Ryan and Kellner (1988) state that a documentary cannot exist without an "extensive manipulation of reality" (p.274), through the choice of subject matter, editing practices, and other artistic and commercial decisions. They often communicate a "mediated view" of reality by allowing the dominant ideology a free passage (Comolli and Narboni, 2004, p.813).

This politics of erasure is not only evident in the films' sole focus on BAL under Mujib's leadership but also in the topics they choose to be silent about. Both films attribute the sole credit for the proclamation of Bangladesh' independence in the early hours of March 26, 1971, to Mujib and his heroic leadership. While there are many debates and controversies surrounding the proclamation of independence (Hasan, Mirza, and Khondaker, 2009; Ahmed, 2016; Riaz, 2016), most written documents claim that Mujib was in favor of a negotiated settlement regarding the formation of the national assembly (Ahmed, 2016). He was also reluctant to declare independence till March 25, 1971, as he thought the action might provoke the General Yahya Khan's administration to charge him with sedition (Hasan, Mirza, and Khondaker, 2009; Ahmed, 2016; Riaz, 2016). Ignoring this crucial detail to establish Mujib's heroism through a Mujibist and pro-BAL hegemonic lens in both two films overlook the technicalities, complexities, and nuances that Mujib needed to consider in 1971's political climate.

The films also conveniently omit Mujib's role as the premier of an independent Bangladesh from 1972 to 1975. These four years were laden with many controversies, starting from limited resources in a war-ravaged country, a famine, an incompetent administration, restrictions on press freedom (Riaz, 2016; Mohaimen, 2024), BAL's corruption, crimes, extrajudicial killings, and accusations of nepotism against Mujib himself (Ahmed, 1984; Mascarenhas, 1986; Jahan, 2005; Ahsan, 2014; Riaz, 2016), culminating in the one-party rule under Mujib's leadership (Riaz, 2016; Ruud, 2022). These controversies clearly go against the pro-democracy and pro-people image of Mujib portrayed throughout both the films and is conveniently omitted or sidelined in their narratives. The one-party state is portrayed as a necessary step to rebuild a war-ravaged country in *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* (2023), never once acknowledging its colossally undemocratic nature that made way for authoritarianism in the

country (Riaz, 2016). Such media behavior (Herman and Chomsky, 1996) of erasing the negative aspects of Mujib's political career to push the ideology of Mujibism demonstrate the characteristics of integration propaganda, which is disseminated through the main channels of communication- newspapers, television, movies, textbooks, political speeches etc. and produced by those in power (Silverstein, 1950; Ellul, 1973). Films work as an effective medium in this case due to their accessibility, emotional resonance, and semi-autonomous nature with little to room for critical reflection (Trotsky, 1923). Both films heavily rely on Mujib's political goodwill that Bangladesh's people still have faith in (Ruud, 2022), to shift the public opinion (Bernays, 1923; Livingston and Platinga, 2009) in BAL's favor.

When it comes to the challenges faced by Mujib from 1972 to 1975, the one most highlighted in both films are his isolation and distance from his close political associates like Tajuddin Ahmed. However, Tajuddin has no voice in this narrative. It all comes from the Sheikh family's perspective, who portray Mujib as a victim of this isolation. The narratives in both films do not shed light on the internal conflict in BAL between Mujib's nephew Sheikh Moni and Tajuddin, which started over Tajuddin's prime ministership and attempts to make the war efforts more inclusive, right after Tajuddin formed the interim wartime government in April 1971 (Mascarenhas, 1986; Hasan, Mirza, and Khondaker, 2009; Ahmed, 2016; Riaz, 2016). These differences continued after the war, with Mujib heavily relying on his nephew's counsel and distancing himself from Tajuddin (Mascarenhas, 1986; Hasan, Mirza, and Khondaker, 2009; Ahmed, 2016; Riaz, 2016).

And thus, through the erasure of the role played by the Mujib administration from 1972 to 1975, the depiction of the 1975 coup remains devoid of context and the political developments

preceding it. The narratives presented in both films conveniently skip these four years to directly attribute martyrdom to the Sheikh family, as Ruud (2022) writes,

> "Even if they took place four years apart, the war of independence and Bangabandhu's assassination have become one grand narrative of struggle against evil-doers and demons, a narrative that is brimming with feelings of loss and sorrow, and with sacrifice and pride, and with the good against the evil." (p.543)

On the other side of this good versus evil dichotomy is General Ziaur Rahman, the founder of BAL's prime opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). This is where the politics of labeling comes into play, with the anti-BNP rhetoric being very clear in both films. General Ziaur Rahman's role in the 1975 coup is amplified by labeling him as the mastermind of the coup. However, multiple accounts of the events surrounding the 1975 coup suggest that Ziaur Rahman consciously distanced himself from the junior officers within the army behind the 1975 coup, primarily because of his higher rank within the military (Lifschultz and Bird, 1979; Mascarenhas, 1986). Bringing General Ziaur Rahman to the forefront of the narrative regarding the 1975 coup in these two films thus shows a deeper political motivation of discrediting the opposition.

The erasure of the controversies surrounding Hasina's premiership in *Hasina: A Daughter's Tale* (2018) is also particularly interesting. Two instances described in the analysis demonstrate this similarity of the documentary with *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* (2023). In the first one, Hasina talks about expressing her commitment to ending the bloodshed and saga of coups and countercoups in the cantonments after taking the helm of BAL. However, she remains conveniently silent on the BDR mutiny in 2009 (right after she took office), in which more than 50 army officials were killed (Mustafa, 2024). She also talks about her unwavering commitment

to democracy and brief interaction with an anti-dictatorship protester Noor Hossain in the 1990s to create an emotional appeal but is conveniently silent on the two major student movements in 2018 and her administration's undemocratic handling of them (Jackman, 2019).

Devoid of the controversial and undemocratic aspects of her career, Hasina's story becomes that of an archetypal worthy successor, the only legitimate ruler of a nation which was shaped by her father. With a mythical touch, her story also omits her shortcomings as a premier, just like *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* (2023) omits those of her father. This is a reflection of how the cult of Mujib has been protected by legal and social taboo (Taves, 2012; Ruud, 2022), discouraging objective commentary on the careers of the father-daughter duo, legitimizing their political actions, and censoring and vilifying those who oppose them through legal means, like the 2018 cybersecurity law (Ruud, 2022). In this sense, Mujibism, as an extension to the cult of Mujib, is employed in the two films to ensure BAL's monopolization of Mujib's legacy and historical narratives surrounding the birth of Bangladesh through this politics of labeling and the politics of erasure.

The inclusion of Mujibist ideology is crucial to understanding the two films and their release before two consecutive national elections from a personalistic authoritarian lens (Riaz, 2025). This ideology is a national myth (Riaz, 2025) and a mental framework that works as the "concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation" (Foss, 2018) deployed by BAL to make sense of Bangladesh's history in their own terms and urge the public to do the same. Employing Mujib's cult of personality and the glorification of his family's sacrifices in these two films can be read as BAL's desperate attempt to legitimize the shortcomings of the Bangladesh's economy and political system under their regime. The films employ Mujibism as an ideology which positions Sheikh Hasina as the worthy successor of an

almost flawless, prophetic leader. It also positions the Sheikh family as a supreme unit which possesses all the rights to state property by virtue of their sacrifices and the Sheikh name. In this personalistic authoritarian view, the party or the supreme leader in power becomes the personification of the state (Riaz, 2025), and anyone who opposes them is framed as an anti-national. Khan and Dorschner (2023) alternatively term this tendency as personalized autocracy, or "personacracy".

Films are an "intensely political and ideological medium" (Kellner (2013). Understanding the politics of biopics thus requires an understanding of their political and ideological implications. The portrayal of the characters present in films delivers cues to the audience on which character should be glorified, and which character should be vilified, therefore attempting to establish their place in history. Through a glorified portrayal of the Sheikhs in these two films and a vilified portrayal of the opposing forces, these two films equate the Sheikh family with everything that turned Bangladesh into an independent and sovereign country. They can also be seen as an attempt to rewrite Bangladesh's history by focusing on the contributions and sacrifices of one person, one family, and one political party, during a time of heightened censorship, where all opposing opinions were being muzzled by brute force (Mohaimen, 2024; Mustafa, 2024). The employment of an ideology like Mujibism in these two films is an interesting demonstration of how a regime attempts to inspire people to accept and support said regime by altering and erasing history through means other than brute force, as part of integration propaganda (Silverstein, 1950; Ellul, 1973).

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis uncovered how two films government-funded films functioned as propaganda to reinforce the ideology of Mujibism to legitimize BAL and further the regime's hold on power in Bangladesh. The historical narratives surrounding Bangladesh's birth has been subject to constant changes and retellings with every regime change, whether it is through textbooks, observance of national holidays, history archives, and mass media (Paul, 2024). Mujibism, as an extension of Mujib's cult of personality, was pushed through these two films to legitimize the BAL rule. As mentioned before, the films were chosen considering their production value and timing of release. These films were not only released before two consecutive national elections but also during a time of heightened censorship barring alternative narratives of the ones portrayed in the films, attempting to establish a linear, one-dimensional, and BAL-glorifying retelling of Bangladesh's history in its national sphere. According to Indian security and geopolitical analyst Lt Gen Bhopinder Singh (retd):

> History is instructive that the more unreasonable a cult is, the more force is deployed to establish it. Invariably, the political party that births the cult leader, becomes secondary to the identity of cult leaders themselves. It happened with the Communist Party in deference to Stalin, Ba'ath Party in subordination to Saddam Hussein, or more recently, to the Awami League deifying Bangabandhu (friend of Bengal) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. (2025)

BAL's 16-year-long regime was able to take this tendency further by appropriating and monopolizing Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's legacy as the founding father of the nation by claiming him solely for BAL's political advantage. Strengthening the cult of Mujibism under the Hasina administration resulted in an over projection of Mujib in every sphere of Bangladesh's national

life (Azran, 2024). Mujib's portrait has been present in all currency notes, government offices, and establishments – with 70 of them named after him. Any and every action of BAL came to seek justification in the name of the founding father and his dreams for the country (Ruud, 2022).

BAL's exploitation of Mujib's legacy has also created a distance between the masses and the images and sentiments surrounding the nation's founding father. Mujib's legacy can be broadly divided into two parts – his leadership preceding Bangladesh's independence, and his failure as an administrator post-independence (Anam, 2024). BAL's silence regarding the second has been evident in the analysis of the two films this thesis is centered on. The Hasina administration's use of Mujib's cult of personality as a means of justifying its misrule and authoritarian tendencies has tainted the image of Mujib as an unquestionable leader of the country's struggle for independence, particularly among the youth who played the key role in ousting Hasina during the mass uprising in July 2024 (Azran, 2024). Consequently, the anger they felt against the Hasina regime was manifest in the vandalism of Mujib's statues and murals constructed during the last 16 years, and the destruction of Mujib's historic Dhanmondi 32 residence in Dhaka (later turned into a museum), after Sheikh Hasina was ousted from office and left the country (Anam, 2024; Azran, 2024).

The student leaders, who were at the forefront of the July revolution last year, have been vocal about countering this cult of personality and have refused to recognize Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the nation's founding father (Mahmud, 2024; Anam, 2024). As a post-Hasina Bangladesh is slowly trying to find its way as a democracy amid the post-revolution chaos under the leadership of Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus, chief adviser of the Interim Government of Bangladesh, there have also been institutional attempts of dismantling the cult of Mujib (Mahmud, 2024). The interim government revoked eight national days – including the one

commemorating the historic March 7 speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the national mourning day on August 15 commemorating the assassination of the Sheikh family during the 1975 coup – in October last year (The Daily Star, 2024).

Thus, Bangladesh finds itself at a crossroads yet again. It now has another chance at redefining its historical narrative free of the influence of any cults of personality and restrictions on free speech. The country is faced with the opportunity of giving each actor their due credit, acknowledging the complicated roles played by each of them during different periods of the country's history, and understanding the shades and nuances that precede them. If Bangladesh misses that chance, it risks falling into the same cycle of the politics of erasure and making way for more cults in the future years to fill the vacuum.

This thesis illustrates how big-budget films can be employed as tools of integration propaganda to redefine a country's history by selectively constructing and mediating historical narratives through visual media, ignoring the nuances and complexities of such narratives collected and compiled from a diverse range of sources. Moreover, it also reinforces the idea that propaganda is not merely a tool of persuasion, but a sustained ideological practice that works to naturalize political authority -- in this case, through the cultivation and dissemination of Mujibism as a legitimizing framework for BAL's protracted rule.

As for communication scholarship, the thesis situates itself in a unique geopolitical perspective and underscores the need to investigate how media operates not only as a vehicle of information, but also as a site of ideological production. The findings raise critical concerns about the role of state-sponsored media in entrenching hegemonic ideologies and silencing dissenting narratives. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for critically engaging with media texts, but also for fostering a more pluralistic and reflective political discourse.

Future research on ideology, propaganda, and mass media in a Bangladeshi context can take a more experimental or quantitative approach to explore the effects of mass media on their audience, and their political understanding and ideologies. Scholarship on propaganda could also revisit these two films and analyze the new meanings or ways in which it resonates with its audience, considering the universality of archetypes portrayed in the films. Researchers could explore if and how these films work in shifting public sentiments toward BAL by establishing the narratives portrayed in the film as a renewed form of historical truth. Future research could also investigate the ways and the reasons these films might shape or reshape the collective memory and contested memory that the relevant audiences have on the historical events surrounding Bangladesh's independence and the events that came before and after, drawing examples and comparisons from the propaganda films produced in Nazi Germany preceding and during World War II.

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