

Memories, cultural imaginations and Dhaka



THE GRUDGING URBANIST
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HOW do cities like Dhaka in the throes of frenzied development deal with memories and literary depictions in the process of their transformations? Are there any "provisions" for considering abstractions like memories and cultural imaginations in the planning of cities? Are cities not imaginations as much as they are real? Baudelaire's Paris, Eliot's London, Joyce's Dublin, Fitzgerald's New York, Mahfouz's Cairo, and, more recently, Amitav Ghosh's Kolkata, and Suketu Mehta's Mumbai—are all testament to cities recreated in the virtuality of literature.

I have long wondered about literary Dhaka. How did cultural imaginations of this city shape our perception and experience of it? I slowly understood Dhaka's cosmopolitanism, magic realism, historicism, melancholia and urban absurdities. For a long time, I struggled to ask the right questions about the meaning of this city's quintessential chaos, intensity, congestion, and beautifully infernal urban density. This is a city that narrates its myriad of stories without telling any at all. In many ways, I find myself writing about this city as a retroactive act of penitence for failing to realise how the South Asian capital city reveals its inner stories through the language of spatiality and urbanity. As much as it is about buildings, noisy roads, rickshaws and people, Dhaka is also about the dramas that unfold in its crowded, labyrinthine sidewalks.

One must concoct certain moments during which Dhaka begins to "speak." Such

as when I encountered a parrot-man on a crowded Gulistan sidewalk. His obedient green bird, the object of puzzled glances and mass curiosity, idled nonchalantly as hurried passersby stopped to have their fortunes drawn. As soon as one did, the bird sprang into action, trotting down a line of envelopes before making its selection. Inside was a cryptic message about the pedestrian's future that provoked a reaction, but exactly what kind—happy? anxious?—I couldn't tell.

In *The City* (1929), Theodore Dreiser gushed about his New York, writing: "Nowhere is there anything like it. My City. Not London. Not Paris. Not Moscow. Not any city I have ever seen. So strong. So immense. So elate." Dhaka evokes similar, and of course, dissimilar passions. Some are apocalyptic, some exuberantly romantic, some nonsensically loyal, some fatalistic, and some sarcastic. My Dhaka is a delirious reservoir of a zillion stimuli. It is a laboratory for a host of actors to try out their ideas, fantasies, even jinn stories. It is like the prophesising parrot, both a tale of fortune and a fortune teller.

Dhaka is also a postmodernist setting in which its inhabitants may enact their wildest dreams or weave new historiographies. In *Chilekothar Sepai (The Attic Soldier, 1986)*, the Bengali novelist Akhtaruzzaman Elias recast Bengal's historical syncretism amid the political agitation of late-1960s Dhaka: "Has anyone ever seen such a massive procession in Dhaka? ... Days pass, city population explodes, city expands. But who are these people in the procession? Are they the same people who breathe like him [the protagonist] and eat fish and rice like common Bengalis? So many of them seem unfamiliar! Who are they really? Is it possible that people from all historical eras have joined the march?" Elias's Dhaka could never



PHOTO: ATA MOJLISH

be one thing. It is a cocktail of historicity, politics, rurality, accidental urbanity, and unusual characters. His was a Dhaka both traumatised and energised by the past, the present, and the future. Mostly, it was uncanny, always deferred, and unrelenting in its growth, confusion, chaos and promise.

The other day I was reading Bangabandhu's *Unfinished Memoirs*. I found one of his most poignant expressions in these lines: "One evening my jail warden locked my door from outside and left. From inside the small room of Dhaka Central Jail, I looked at the sky." I wondered what kind of sky he saw. Was it a rural sky? Political sky? Optimistic sky? Did the clouds weave a map of his *shonar*

Bangla on the sky canvas? Or was it the same melancholic sky that the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish described in his deeply haunting poem "The Earth is Closing on Us": "Where should the birds fly after the last sky?" Darwish encapsulated the existential pain of the Palestinians by imagining it in the shape of birds that no longer had any sky to fly to. Did an incarcerated Bangabandhu see a sky that mirrored the political agitation that raged in Dhaka and beyond?

I wondered about poet Shamsur Rahman's Dhaka: "City city Dhaka city, this strange city, This city has many zigzag alleys." Was "strange" a metaphor for urban alienation or the urban intrigue of Old Dhaka's zigzag

alleys? Is there a common thread between Shamsur Rahman's alley and Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*, a bustling Cairo back street that serves as a conceptual theatre for all kinds of stories of life? Visiting the coffee shops that Mahfouz frequented at Khan el-Khalili, the thriving bazaar in the historic centre of Cairo, I thought Shamsur Rahman and Mahfouz depicted the same human spirit that makes a city a city. Yet, both the imagination and the provocation of the human spirit are sparked by the spatiality of cities, streets, buildings, and their complex social interrelationships.

Great cities preserve the physical remnants of those historical traces that made them great in the first place. While in Prague, I followed the "Kafka trail" to understand how Kafka and Prague created each other.

A week ago, I was returning to Dhaka from Chattogram on a train. From the window I watched a country undergoing a rapid transformation. Buildings are rising everywhere, blocking the view of Bengal's archetypal pastoral landscape. At some point I fell asleep. When I woke up after an hour or so, I dreamed out seeing nothing outside. It had been almost 11 hours since the train left the Chattogram station and we were still not in Dhaka. The train sped along the tracks, but where was the train going? Finally, a fellow passenger, visibly worried, disclosed to me that the train hurtled past Dhaka because there was no station to stop at. The train could only pierce through a void. There was no Kamalapur station. When I looked outside there was only emptiness. Was this my Kafkaesque nightmare? All great literary works are in the end an act of activism.

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Creating a 'safer' Bangladesh for women

It's time for us to change the narrative



WHY is it so difficult to write about something that seems so obvious and urgent? Can it have something to do with that very "obviousness" itself? What if we were to switch codes for a second and change the title to "Creating a safer Bangladesh for men." How absurd does that sound? Almost everyone I presented this "alternate" title to either smiled or scoffed, regardless of their gender. Yet "Creating a safer Bangladesh for women" seems entirely apt; with an endless barrage of stories of violence in the media, it almost feels as if now is the worst time ever to be a woman. As much as I clearly appreciate such concerns, however, this underlying saviour-complex bothers me to no end. Are women an endangered species that need to be kept safe in a sanctuary? It is great that we are now having a conversation around women's safety, but how about we make it a conversation about equality instead?

Before we can talk about rights or equality, however, let us be cognisant of the fact that women are not one. There is no magic formula that can cater to the diversity of women's experiences, privileges and impediments that come with differences in class, ethnicity, religion, age and sexuality, and inclusivity has been a problem in both the "development" world as well as within the women's movement. Yet there is one thing that binds them all together as women: their second-class status in society. I may have a PhD, earn a considerable amount of money and raise a family, but I do not have equal rights as a man, either legally or socially. My constitution preserves my right to be a free and equal citizen, and yet after 50 years of independence, I am still on the streets fighting for equal rights, let alone the violence that is inflicted upon us 24/7. Is this the freedom that our parents and grandparents had fought for?

Let us not be distracted; you may call gender a "social construct," a "performance" (Butler, 1988), or indeed an elephant in the room—but the fact remains that there is deep and systemic gender inequality, learned and perpetuated from the level of the family to the state. Every social institution plays its part in sustaining this inequality and maintaining the status quo. We learn to hide, be invisible and be non-threatening, sheltering our body from birth to death. Our mission in life as a species seems to be to perpetually protect ourselves, even in our sleep; not to live like fully-evolved human beings. What a waste of energy!

Our "fragility"/"subservience" is not natural—it is a historical product. The Victorian morals of the metropolises permeated through the gendered class system in the colonies. Formal education and the introduction of a wage economy transformed agrarian gender relations, resulting in educated middle-class (mostly) men migrating to the urban centres, the rise of monogamy, and the

nuclearisation of the family. Men emerged as the sole earners in their nuclear families, while women and children were reduced to being dependent "consuming units". As Bengal, along with the rest of British India, became increasingly swept up in anti-colonial, nationalist sentiments, the *bhadrolok* (educated middle class) iconised Indian women as the repositories of tradition—"modern and yet modest", a true representation of the newly "imagined nation" (Chatterjee, 2010). Both women and the nation thus had to be "rescued" from the coloniser. This construct also entered through the window into the Muslim *Zenana mahal*.

This gendered construct of women's subservience came to shape how Bangladesh as a nation was imagined. We put the nation's honour in women's wombs, calling them *birangonas*, while simultaneously immortalising the nation as mother, a sacrificial female figure in need of saving. Such idol-worshipping helped to feed a sensational nationalism, but had little to do with women's actual lives. Where do characters like freedom fighter Taramon Bibi, the nurses and field-doctors of 1971 like

only became critical of these regimes but played leading roles in mobilising against and overthrowing them altogether.

With the neoliberal turn and the expansion of the development sector in the 1980-90s, women's organisations had to register as NGOs to maintain their legal existence. While larger organisations like Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Naripokhkhoo and Ain-o-Shalish Kendra managed to mobilise their resources and networks to pursue their own agendas, smaller NGOs succumbed and became service-delivery organisations that followed donors' mandates. This brought with it the saviour complex inherent in most donor agencies and international humanitarian organisations that essentialised people of colour as default "victims" (Chowdhury, 2011). The neoliberal discourse of "women empowerment" emanated from a similar premise, targeting individualised entitlements while disregarding the collective agency of women themselves. Whether we admit it or not, civil-society organisations allowed this language of "victimhood" to perpetuate, or were unable to resist it.

be demonstrating in front of the Press Club, Shaheed Minar and National Parliament demanding justice for Aurna, Tonu or Yasmin. This cannot be reduced to "women's issues" to make us look like perpetual victims. Why is this not a national issue? Why should oppressing half the population not result in all-out war, if that was the justified language or true "essence" of the Liberation War? Why does the very existence and visibility of women pose such a threat to society and "man"-kind? Perhaps that should be our question.

Even if we embrace neoliberal development as the paradigm for our individual and national aspirations, there is simply no way to ignore women's contributions. Neither the narrative of a developing Bangladesh nor the discourse of SDGs are complete without their poster girls: the school-going child, the garments worker, the happy farmer, the small/medium entrepreneur, and the migrant worker; add to that the countless hours women put in everyday as unpaid housework and social labour. It is clearly not women's fragility or subservience but their "empowered" selves that are sold in the neoliberal market. That is the face the state desires in/as a "medium-income country"—where then, is our share of this sale? My own research reveals that for urban middle-class families, it is impossible to survive without a dual income; this is even more true for the working classes. This means that whether our norms allow or not, *everyone* must get out and earn a living, regardless of their gender, just to survive. Safe or not, then, more and more women and transgender persons will be occupying public spaces; this is inevitable. The question is: is Bangladesh ready for it?

As much as we take pride in having a woman as Prime Minister and as Speaker of the Parliament, have we been able to translate such power and privilege to every woman in Bangladesh? Is it not a farce that we feel pride in women's achievements while depriving them of what is rightfully theirs—the very right to exist as they please? So, no, we as women will not ask for your benevolence nor pander for your protection. What I want is for every parent to raise their children as equals, to not shackle them, and to teach them to treat each other with respect. I want to see a nurturing society, dedicated to creating an enabling space for every individual to grow. I want a state that will put justice over party allegiance, and one that is unafraid to push for equal rights in property and entitlements for every citizen.



PHOTO: SUDESHNA BISWAS

Fowzia Moslem, cultural and political activists like Nurjahan Murshid and Sufia Kamal, fit into these narratives? Where are the accounts of our mothers and grandmothers who held their families together and rebuilt this nation from scratch? They neither asked for our homage nor waited for a "knight in shining armour". It is time we take our pity-party for women elsewhere.

"The new woman" of Bangladesh was imagined by the women's rights activists to be truly independent economically and socially, having equal rights in every sphere of life. These activists helped to (re-)build the war-torn nation-state, helping with relief and rehabilitation while also pushing for new policies and laws that would ensure equal rights for women. The succeeding autocratic regimes coincided with the United Nations' "Decade for Women" (1975-85); these regimes upheld the liberal values promulgated under the UN's approach and sold "women's issues" to secure aid, while simultaneously using religion to legitimise their rule and as a weapon to deny women their rights in practice. Soon, a faction of the women's movement not

Yet despite having to battle the saviour complex of the state as well as development agencies, women have continued to pave their own paths, negotiating with various social forces in their everyday lives, individually as well as collectively, to bring about profound changes. Women have negotiated with their gender, generation, class, sexuality and kin while experiencing major economic-structural shifts. They have bargained with patriarchy across class-lines and recast the boundaries of the "private" and the "public". Despite domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment and countless other forms of trauma and stigma, women have persisted. Be it in agriculture, farming, garments, leather, education, civil service, development, as entrepreneurs or as migrant workers, women have thrived. As much as I would like to give some of the credit for this to the state, development agencies and civil society along with all those women who have been fighting for their rights, I am also hesitant precisely because of their "protectionist" attitudes.

After 50 years of independence, neither my comrades nor I expected to

I do not think we are dealing with a complicated question here. We are demanding equality, which is our constitutional birthright. Individuals, families, society and the state need to "gear up" to make the readjustments necessary to enable women to achieve their full potentials. There is an indomitable force that is coming; they are coming in droves in saris and kameezes, hijabs and pants. Will Bangladesh feel safe once they start living their lives, or just *be*?

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QUOTABLE Quote

NGUGI WA THIONG'O (1938-)
Kenyan writer and academic

If you know all the languages of the world but not your mother tongue, that is enslavement. Knowing your mother tongue and all other languages too is empowerment.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Ticket remnants
- 6 Kitchen come-on
- 11 Skater Harding
- 12 "Alice" star
- 13 Pick from the menu
- 14 Resided
- 15 Once known as
- 16 Penny prez
- 18 Brink
- 19 Drop the ball
- 20 Swindle
- 21 Pot fill
- 22 Corrupt
- 24 Have nothing to do with
- 25 Tribute VIP
- 27 Sign of trouble
- 29 "Love Yourself" singer

DOWN

- 1 Pothead
- 2 Bullring star
- 3 Unnoticed
- 4 Tourney pass
- 5 Mideasterner during the Crusades
- 6 Flower name
- 7 Unrefined
- 8 In an adjacent nation
- 9 Setting
- 10 2015 Paul Rudd movie
- 17 Congo chimps
- 23 Great weight
- 24 Take in
- 26 Skating venue regular
- 27 First Family of 2010
- 28 Zambia neighbor
- 30 Galahad's mother
- 31 Negligent
- 33 Appointments
- 39 Is for two
- 41 French friend

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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