Myth, monkey, mohalla: Many-layered meanings of old Dhaka

in the works of Shahidul Zahir

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to decode multi-layered meanings of old Dhaka in the works of Shahidul Zahir. It examines the ways that Shahidul Zahir's novel *I See the Face*, novella *Life and Political Reality*, and two short stories "The History of Our Cottage Industry" and "The Woodcutter and the Ravens" chart various alternative landscape expressions, specifically those of human and nonhuman excluded cultures. Further, the study investigates human-nonhuman acts of place-making through creative, tactical, and transgressive spatial uses. "The History of Our Cottage Industry" depicts old Dhaka in the 1960s as an emergent merchandised zone that becomes both spaces of labor and leisure depending on various users. *Life and Political Reality* pictures a war-torn old Dhaka in which dominant and excluded groups compete for their landscape assertions. *I See the Face* outlines the creation of a knowable community through mohalla-centric oral communications. Set between the 1960s and the early 2000s, the novel charts the ways that excluded groups use metaphorical space to articulate a breadth of cultural meanings tied to the material space. It interrogates how monkeys as nonhuman excluded groups contravene human spatial boundaries and, in the process, engage in place-making. "The Woodcutter and the Ravens" likewise offer a look at how crows and ravens appropriate public and semi-private domains. My thesis implies that old Dhaka is a textured place with abundant historically specific dominant and alternative cultural meanings. Its purpose is to stress the significance of a plurality of spatial perspectives in understanding the entirety of old Dhaka. Mainstream media representations of the landscape since the 1950s rest on the city's singular image as a heritage site. Anchored to the archaic and the residual elements of the nawabi era, their iterations crystallize a normative way of viewing this urban landscape as a spatial other to new Dhaka. Shahidul Zahir's writings between the 1980s and the early 2000s depart from what I suggest are fetishized renditions of the city.

Résumé

Cette thèse vise à décoder les significations multicouches du vieux Dhaka dans les œuvres de Shahidul Zahir. Elle examine les façons dont le roman de Shahidul Zahir *I See the Face*, la nouvelle *Life and Political Reality* et les deux histoires courtes "The History of Our Cottage Industry" et "The Woodcutter and the Ravens" cartographient différentes expressions alternatives de paysages, en particulier celles de cultures humaines et non-humaines qui sont exclues. De plus, l'étude examine les actes de création de lieux humains-non humains à travers des utilisations spatiales créatives, tactiques et transgressives. La nouvelle "The History of Our Cottage Industry" décrit le vieux Dhaka des années 1960 comme une zone marchande émergente qui devient à la fois un espace de travail et de loisirs en fonction des différents utilisateurs. Celle se nommant *Life and Political Reality* montre un vieux Dhaka déchiré par la guerre dans lequel des groupes dominants et exclus s'affrontent pour leurs affirmations paysagères Le texte. *I See the Face* décrit la création d'une communauté reconnaissable grâce à des communications orales centrées sur le mohalla. Centré entre les années 1960 et le début des années 2000, le roman montre comment les groupes exclus utilisent l'espace métaphorique pour articuler une variété de significations culturelles liées à l'espace matériel. Il interroge la façon dont les singes en tant que groupes non humains exclus contreviennent aux limites spatiales humaines et, ce faisant, participent à la création de lieux. L'oeuvre "The Woodcutter and the Ravens" offre également un regard sur la façon dont les corbeaux et les corneilles s'approprient les domaines publics et semi-privés. Ma thèse explicite que le vieux Dhaka est un lieu texturé avec des significations culturelles dominantes et alternatives historiquement spécifiques et abondantes. Son but est de souligner l'importance d'une pluralité de perspectives spatiales pour comprendre l'ensemble du vieux Dhaka. Les représentations médiatiques dominantes du paysage depuis les années 1950 reposent sur l'image unique de la ville en tant que site patrimonial. Ancrées sur les éléments archaïques et résiduels de l'ère nawabi, leurs itérations cristallisent une façon normative de voir ce paysage urbain comme un autre espace par rapport au nouveau Dhaka. Les écrits de Shahidul Zahir entre les années 1980 et le début des années 2000 se détachent, selon moi, des représentations fétichisées de la ville.

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Introduction

Toward a fuller picture of old Dhaka

In his account of old Dhaka published in 1976, Nazir Hossain, the commissioner of Dhaka City Corporation, poignantly recalls the lost courtesan culture of the early twentieth century in Zindabahar, an old Dhaka neighborhood. Following the tradition of his contemporaries, Hossain evokes specific images, meanings, and associations in relation to old Dhaka, constituting in the process the normative understanding of the landscape.

> The old buildings of that era are still here. If we attentively lend an ear to these walls at late night, we will hear the jingles of anklets and the faint echoes of songs of joy and anguish of separation, emanating from many of these *kuthuri*[1]. (qtd. in Rahman 44)

Hossain's nostalgic recollection of past traditions and architectural landmarks (such as, "old buildings", "anklets", "*kuthuri*s") materialize old Dhaka's meaning as a historical site, more precisely, a historical relic[2]. Semantic figures of Bangladeshi authors, memoirists, and documentarians, in short, those belonging to the fields of film and art from 1950 onward signal a similar pattern. Their representation latches onto the idea and ideals of an antiquated nawabi[3] past and its built structures, rendering the inhabitants—humans and nonhumans—invisible. This

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[1] *Kuthuri* is a household where courtesans lived and performed. The quote originally appeared in *Kingbodontir Dhaka* [Dhaka, the City of Legends] and was later quoted by the literary editor and author Mizanur Rahman in his *Dhaka Puran* [Myths of Dhaka]. The text here is in my translation from Bangla.

[2] I draw on the expression from Sandeep Banerjee and Subho Basu (126). My analysis of spatial exoticization is predominantly anchored in their works on the representations of cities in Bengali and Anglophone literature from colonial India.

[3] Generally Mughal governors, some nawabs of old Dhaka also received the title from the British government. Hailed from a family of Kashmiri traders, Khwaja Abdul Ghani was not a Mughal governor and founded the new nawabi line of Dhaka in 1830 (S. Ahmed 15). Nawab Sir Salimullah is his descendant (Dani 71).

iteration of old Dhaka as a heritage site centering on the archaic and the residual[4] corresponds to

the landscape expressions of the city's dominant media culture. Surely it has economic

implications for the state as well. A fetishized rendition of old Dhaka increases tourist appeal.

Further, it establishes new Dhaka's modernity as opposed to old Dhaka's antiquity[5]. Ahmad

Hasan Dani's guidebook, *Dacca[6]: A Record of Its Changing Fortunes*, for foreign delegates

visiting the erstwhile capital of East Pakistan chronicles:

> The old town with its medieval appearance, winding streets and age-old markets, still
>
> guards the secret of its origin… Long thoroughfares give a complete cross section of the
>
> old town. But the most revolutionary change that is now going on is the addition of the
>
> new town, which not only tastes of modernity but also forecasts a complete change in the
>
> life of the city. Dacca is in the grip of rebirth from the old into a new world. (6)

This section of the travel guide from 1956 records the expansion of the new Dhaka.

Signifiers, such as "medieval", "age-old", "secret of its origin" indicate the "old town" as

antithetical to the "new town" that brings "tastes of modernity" to the urban lifestyle. In this

projection, the landscape of old Dhaka is perceived from the outside. It is not experienced from

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[4] The horse carriage, common in old Dhaka literature, is an active manifestation of the residual. During the mid-nineteenth century, it was the primary means of transportation for local zamindars or feudal lords, nawabs or Mughal governors, and the upper class in Dhaka. Superseded by cycle rickshaws and public buses in the twentieth century (Ahmed 105), it is now viewed as a symbol of heritage. On rare occasions, people use it as an exotic ride that is only available at specific locations in old Dhaka, especially from Gulistan to Sadarghat. For an overview of the term "residual", See Williams 122-23, and Cosgrove 132-33.

[5] Old Dhaka is marked by its Mughal Heritage. Since 1608, when the Mughal governor, Islam Khan established it as a provincial capital, five Mughal princes and several governors visited the city and left their traces, building mosques, mausoleums, tombs, and forts (Dani 87). Even when the British rose to prominence in 1765, the city retained its Mughal ways of life till 1843 (Dani 7). It was the time when European taste and fashion began to supersede the Mughal lifestyle, setting the stage for the west-and-northward expansion of new Dhaka. During the Pakistan period, the city primarily extended northward, developing the Gulshan Model Town in 1961, Banani in 1964, and Uttara in 1965 (Kabir and Parolin 9). In the 1990s, Baridhara was developed (B. Ahmed 1421). At present, Mohammadpur skirts old Dhaka in the west, Dhanmondi and New Market border it in the east, and River Buriganga encircles it in the south (Abusaleh 61). For a comprehensive study on the construction of new Dhaka, see B. Ahmed.

[6] The former spelling of Dhaka.

within. A continuation of this 'way of seeing' figures in the 2012 thesis proposal of a bachelor's student of architecture. She suggests that relocating the central jail area from Lalbagh will create a space for organizing "kawali at night ... monkey games, snake charmer showing games [sic]" (Mymuna). Her assertion refuses coevalness between the old city and its newer counterpart. These former forms of entertainment dwindled to a trickle due to globalization and urban industrial capitalism[7].

All in all, the given extracts provide a partial image of the old city, albeit a dominant articulation of the landscape. But old Dhaka, like any other place, carries a multitude of symbolic meanings for and by not only dominant and residual but also excluded cultures[8]. This thesis draws on Denis Cosgrove's deliberations on dominant, residual, emergent, and excluded cultures in an effort to decode those meanings, especially those of the excluded groups, in a diachronic manner. Old Dhaka is not just about material topography or past traditions but also lived dimensions. When we consider the experiential in understanding this area, it no longer remains a landscape to look at from a distance, spatial and/or temporal, but becomes a place of meanings, attachments, and connections[9]. Only when we combine dominant and alternative landscape expressions can we move closer to achieving a complete picture of the old city. The purpose of

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[7] I associate snake and monkey charming with what Raymond Williams calls 'the archaic'. These are elements of the past that are occasionally "'revived', in a deliberately specialized way" (Williams 122). Kawali devotional gathering, on another note, is residual. Today, it is not widely practiced in Dhaka. The popularity of kawali or qawwali (devotional songs) began to dwindle with the introduction of cable TV and radio channels. Since the 1990s, modern sound systems (including DJ and dance parties) superseded traditional forms of entertainment (Abusaleh et al. 63). However, research shows that qawwali gatherings still take place during Muharram celebrations (Jalais 73) at Bihari ghettos in Mirpur, new Dhaka. But, because of its nawabi lineage, people commonly identify qawwali as exclusive to old Dhaka.

[8] See Denis Cosgrove's exegesis on dominant and alternative cultures (131-134). He divides the latter into three cultures: residual, emergent, and excluded. For a comprehensive analysis of the dominant, the residual, and the emergent, See Williams 121-27.

[9] My use of the terms "landscape" and "place" draws from Cresswell's "Defining Place". He expounds that "we do not live in landscapes—we look at them," while place is "a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world" (11). See Cresswell (8-12).

this thesis is to draw a "humane geography" (Cosgrove 127) by describing and analyzing the manners in which excluded groups create a 'sense of place'.

Shahidul Zahir's writings between the 1980s and the early 2000s move away from the typical, fetishized, historical rendition of the old city. His works provide a well-rounded picture by re-presenting a historically-specific myriad of mediations—dominant, residual, excluded, emergent—forming the space. His short story "The History of Our Cottage Industry" documents an emerging social order that is eventually subsumed under the dominant culture. Excluded groups alongside continue to leave their cultural meanings through informal and creative spatial uses. Other works illustrate nonhuman excluded groups scrambling for their beastly spaces in the city. Connecting human and animal geography, this thesis examines diverse uses of space paying particular attention to excluded human and nonhuman place-making activities from the 1970s to the 2000s. To this end, it analyzes four fictional works by Shahidul Zahir produced between the 1980s and the 2000s. Specifically, my thesis constellates a novel *I See the Face* (hereafter *Face*), a novella *Life and Political Reality* (hereafter *Life*), and two short stories "The History of Our Cottage Industry" (hereafter "History") and "The Woodcutter and the Ravens" (hereafter "Woodcutter")[10]. I contend that Zahir's characteristic 'way of seeing' proffers many-layered meanings of old Dhaka through an "alteration of landscape" by means of "an alteration of

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[10] *Life and Political Reality*, *I See the Face*, "The History of Our Cottage Industry," and "The Woodcutter and the Ravens" were originally published in Bangla as *Jibon O Rajnoitik Bastobota* (1988), *Mukher Dike Dekhi* (2006), "Amader Kutirshilper Itihaash" (1995), and "Kathure O Dnarkaak" (1992) respectively. Shahidul Zahir himself translated the short story "Amader Kutirshilper Itihaash" into English and titled it "History of Our Cottage Industry." It was later published posthumously in his complete works. For this research, I will cite both "History" and "Woodcutter" from *Why There Are No Noyontara Flowers in Agargaon Colony*, a collection of Zahir's short stories in V. Ramaswamy's English translation. Again, I will quote *Face* in V. Ramaswamy's translation. As for *Life*, I am looking at Ramaswamy and my co-translation.

seeing[11]". In other words, his representation departs from the normative nawabi rendition. Rather, it concentrates on ordinary city practitioners, their life, experiences, and spatial practices.

It must be clarified here that the categories of the dominant and the excluded are complex and dynamic. Simply put, they are anchored in the notion of power. They are also historically variable. In *Life*, set in postwar Bangladesh, dominant groups are those who have political power. Those who are at the mercy of corrupt political leaders, i.e., war criminals, grossly belong to the excluded category. Similarly, oral history is excluded culture in relation to nationalist historiography. In "History", set in the 1960s, dominant are the groups with capital, and excluded are the ones who are at the receiving end of the emergent global capitalist modernity. These excluded groups can become dominant in other contexts. Rural newcomers can become excluded groups in the same working-class community in "History". Then within this typology of the excluded are women, minorities, nonhumans, further complicating the category. In *Face* and "Woodcutter", we observe nonhumans as excluded cultures. Therefore, to gloss over the term 'excluded', they are cultures that are "actively or passively suppressed" like that of crime, drugs, fringe religious groups, gays, freemasons, or prostitutes (Cosgrove 125-33). Dominant cultures, in Cosgrove's words, have control over others' "means of life: land, capital, raw materials and labour power" and this power is sustained and reproduced through "their ability to project and communicate, by whatever media are available…an image of the world consonant with their own experience, and to have that image accepted as a true reflection of everyone's reality" (128).

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[11] My use of the phrases "alteration of landscape" and "alteration of seeing" is inspired by Raymond Williams' treatise on structures of feeling in *The Country and the City*. Williams points out the emergence of a new structure of feeling that rejects the pastoral. He argues that the "inclusion of work, and so of working men" is a deliberate "alteration of landscape", by an alteration of seeing" (87). Here, I adopt the terms to indicate Zahir's departure from the extant manner of seeing the old city. The given texts focus on the operations, experiences, and feelings of nonhumans and humans (especially, working and lower middle classes) of old Dhaka.

This thesis analyzes the selected works in two chapters. The first chapter elaborates on the ways in which different excluded human groups encode meanings to space and sometimes contravene socio-spatial conventions through creative, tactical, and transgressive operations. An analysis of Victoria Park's historically variable meanings elucidates this argument. For this, I primarily rely on *Life*, supplementing it with other non-literary texts to demonstrate changes in meanings in different historical moments. This chapter further draws out a mohalla's[12] individual and collective responses to the homogenizing tendencies of the state and business. A close reading of "History" enables us to decode different meanings of space that are sometimes in concordance with and at times at variance with each other. Lastly, the first chapter investigates excluded human groups' use of the space of imagination with respect to *Face*. It outlines the creation of a knowable community through mohalla-centric oral communication. That is to implicate the strength of local lore in contesting dominant media perceptions[13] of old Dhaka. The second chapter move from the issues of excluded human groups to the questions of nonhuman landscape symbolism. I go through *Face* and "Woodcutter" to capture nonhuman movements in and out of domestic spaces and designated zones to reveal how their appropriation of space carries differing meanings for themselves and their human neighbors. Together, the chapters welcome a plurality of spatial perspectives and symbols in the study of old Dhaka.

My introduction contextualizes these chapters in two parts. First, it touches on the morphology of the mohalla to show how the space is conducive to the development and dispersal of urban myths. This works as a pretext for chapter one. Second, it brings human geography into

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[12] A spelling variant of 'moholla' or neighborhood. Except for quotes, I have used 'mohalla' throughout the paper.
[13] Another way to think of perception is what Henri Lefebvre calls perceived space. See Lefebvre's theorization of the spatial triad of representations of space, representational space, and spatial practices in *The Production of Space*.

conversation with animal geography, creating a framework for chapter two's discussions about the nonhuman's negotiation of space and assertion of meanings. Overall, my study is largely informed by the theoretical underpinnings of cultural geography in the works of Raymond Williams and Denis Cosgrove. It moreover engages in a critical conversation with theorists of animal geography, notably Chris Philo, Chris Wilbert, and Jennifer Wolch.

Myths make mohalla, and vice versa

Old Dhaka is pregnant with urban legends of dominant and alternative cultures. Media-disseminated dominant lore yet again reiterates nawabi references[14], revealing a single facet of a pluralistic society. These stories rely on residual traditions as sources of magic and glamor that ordinary life in their renditions seems to lack. However, locally produced, orally transmitted mohalla-centric myths offer an alternative tradition—one that brings out the magic from within the routine life of the everyday. From this mode of communication emerges a knowable community that sheds light on the relationship among knowledge, power, and community, more specifically it questions dominant cultural constructions concerning old Dhaka. Set in and around

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[14] A case in point is "Dozokher Om" or "The Warmth of Hell" (1986) by Akhtaruzzaman Elias, a contemporary of Shahidul Zahir. The story contains urban legends centered around a *pir*, a spiritual figure, of old Dhaka. He is said to be a direct descendant of the great *pir* of Baghdad. One common feature in all his fantastical adventures is the figure of the nawab. While these stories themselves have enough magic to attract public appeal and while the nawab's presence is merely additional information that has little to no effect on the plot's development, his appearance only adds glamor to the telling as if this minor detail guarantees the gossip's legitimacy. One such tale concerns a *pir* who is rumored to burrow into a grave at the start of each Ramadan having had his first sehri meal with his disciples. Throughout the month of Ramadan, his disciples supply him with water and milk to break his fast in the evenings through a pipe. The pipe's one end stays within the reach of the *pir*'s mouth while the other sticks out above the earth. At the end of the fasting season, his grave quivers and he comes out of it to spend the rest of the year offering spiritual assistance until the next Ramadan. As it happens, the mohalla folk gets used to witnessing the practice. On one such Ramadan, the *pir* wraps a white shawl around himself and applies kohl to his eyes, and attar to his body as he descends the grave. When the disciples send milk down the pipe on the twenty-seventh day, the milk comes back in bubbles. Even the nawab himself appears to pour the milk with ground almonds and pistachio mixed in his golden or perhaps silver bowl, but the same thing happens. They wait till the last day of fasting and when the grave still doesn't shake, they surmise that their *pir* has died of his own volition (Elias 300-01). Passed down from generation to generation, this story becomes a local legend. Like this legend, the *pir*'s other miracles also have the nawab as a witness, a minor detail that makes no difference to the main plot.

Narinda, Shahidul Zahir's novel *Face* and, to some extent, his novella *Life*, illustrate the

constitution and dissemination of folk legends through an extended communication system, such

as gossip and rumor, connecting the individual with the collective[15].

Scholars have worked on this concept of knowable community in a myriad of contexts to

uncover generation-specific historical patterns. Bonnie Brennen takes up the idea to demonstrate

oral history's role as a counter-memory to dominant media history (36). Sandeep Banerjee

adopts it to understand individual subjectivities and their lived dimension and to unveil the

spatial desires of literary texts from British India. My thesis adds to their dialog by tracing

excluded cultural meanings, the working-and-lower-middle-class experience, and human-human

and human-nonhuman relations in urban myths produced by the ordinary mohalla folk whose

voices and imagination are often situated outside the purview of the official consciousness of any

society. In their myths, the everyday stands in for the mystique and warrants no support from the

residual or the archaic for legitimacy. This keeps to what Williams sees as "the strength of a

knowable community" that can "challenge the prevailing power structure and provide an

oppositional position within that society" (Brennen 34). That way, urban legends tied to a

mohalla re-write their own history and life, giving voice to the repressed and the ignored. An

exploration of *Life* succinctly illuminates this. Their myths mystify the mundanities of spaces

typically projected as historical and commercial sites and re-inscribe them as lived or social

spaces. Their myths also hint at the present-day social realities and problems as can be seen in

the analysis of *Face*.

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[15] Most novels as "knowable communities", suggests Raymond Williams, "offers to people and their relationships in essentially knowable and communicable ways" (165).

The unique design of the mohalla aids in the creation of an alternative communication system or a knowable community[16]. Mohalla is metaphorically situated, not geographically, in the grey area between the country and the city having both rural connectedness and urban individualization in the form of single-family units and privatized leisure (e.g., car, television). While speaking about rurality, there is a common tendency to romanticize the past by highlighting solidarity and a sense of warmth within a community. A respondent in Jeremy Seabrook's interview illustrates this longing for an organic, community-oriented life in the following lines. His comment serves as a point of departure for my discussion about the mohalla's unique nature.

> I can remember the street on an afternoon; all the women'd be standing round the doors, talking to each other. One would say 'Ah've got nowt for tea, what have you got?' The next one would say 'Ah've got nowt either, I don't know what Ah'm going to do.' Then one would say 'Why don't we make up a parcel and take it down to the pawnshop?' One would say 'Ah've got a pair of pillowcases'; another would have a pair of sheets, another some curtains. So they'd make up a parcel and take it to the pawnshop, and whatever they got, they'd share it out between them, get something for tea . . . The hardships of life didn't bother us like they bother people now. (qtd. in Eyles 110)

The structure of a mohalla is such that it in a sense still retains this connectivity to this day. *Face* spanning a period of nearly four decades from the late 1960s to the early 2000s shows a society where residents interact daily with their neighbors and keep tabs on their everyday life. It is where rumor and gossip metamorphose into urban legends. Chapter One describes the

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[16] In Williams's view, communication and community are synonymous (Brennen 31).

mythmaking process originating in the domestic domain, especially the semi-private areas in the house where people meet their neighbors and visitors. It is where the home meets the world. From here, stories travel across neighborhoods through word of mouth. An old Dhaka mohalla with its narrow, serpentine streets and rickety buildings huddling together provides the intimate atmosphere for these stories to germinate and grow. In *Face*, we witness the making of such myths at moments when Khoimon, like the example above, goes to her neighbor Nurani Bilkis Upoma's house to borrow cooking ingredients. In moments like this or during the interactions between Zobeida Rahman and her son's friend Fakhrul Alam Ledu, personal stories and gossip add layers and turn into folk tales as they travel from mouth to mouth. Mohalla as an organic residential unit stimulates such social interactions and community activities that are rare in most neighborhoods in the new Dhaka. Modern urban design does not encourage or give the scope for such social cohesion.

A morphological analysis of Dhaka city from the period of the 1950s to the 2000s shows that old Dhaka's organic settlement sticks out from among the planned and regulated schemes of new Dhaka, such as the Gulshan and the Baridhara Model Towns (B. Ahmed 1435). Scholars such as Kabir and Parolin suggest that old Dhaka still maintains the Mughal layout (17). Conversely, new Dhaka neighborhoods are conceived and designed in such a way that scarcely promotes organic social interactions. Initially intended to accommodate middle-income groups, these satellite towns are now elite residential areas owing to soaring land prices (Kabir and Parolin 9). Shahidul Zahir's knowable community includes people from different income groups and communities with special attention to working-and-lower-middle class social relations and subjectivities.

Some mohallas in old Dhaka are racial, ethnic, and religious ghettos. There are Hindu and Muslim mohallas as there are mohallas with high Bihari, Gujarati, Pathan, and Marwari[17] concentrations. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, English, French, Greek, Portuguese, and Armenian communities had their own residential units in specific mohallas (S. Ahmed 19). Most of them migrated elsewhere after the partition of India in 1947 but the landscape still bears their cultural expressions. Zahir seeks to recreate this plurality in his imagined geography. Some of his central characters in *Face* are Portuguese people who have lived here for generations. Unearthing the landscape expressions of these numerous excluded groups can move us closer to creating a holistic image of old Dhaka. In other words, digging out their voices can be an avenue for geographical investigation. This small-scale study concentrates on specific human social groups who are ethnically Bengali, and nonhuman excluded groups, particularly monkeys, crows, and ravens, over a period of three decades. Its raison d'être is to recognize the multiplicity of meanings and social experiences in understanding space, place, and landscape.

'[Nonhumans] are subjects not objects[18]': Contextualizing human-animal geography

A common trope in the construction of the exotic in relation to old Dhaka is predicated on the representation of its nonhuman dwellers, especially monkeys, as spectacular beings. Media registrations of the rhesus macaque population in these localities reinforce the area's exotic image. These representations deny the monkeys their subjectivity, treating them as heritage objects, a symbol of old ways of life, a residual element. I engage with this issue in detail in

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[17] A Hindu business community, originating from the Marwad region of present Rajasthan in India. Bihari, Gujarati, and Pathan are communities from different regions in the Indian subcontinent.

[18] Wolch emphasizes that both humans and nonhumans socially construct and influence each other's worlds ("Zoöpolis" 121).

chapter two while analyzing *Face*. The novel further illustrates the uncomfortable human-nonhuman confrontations, negotiations, and interactions over space.

Monkeys are treated as what Philo terms "marginalized, socially excluded persons". They are "'strange persons' similar to outsider human groups", suggests Tim Ingold (qtd. in Wolch 728). A moral panic ensues from their transgressive behaviors, prompting human dwellers to take initiative to sanitize the places where nonhumans leave their imprints. Monkeys in *Face* exhibit a certain level of agency by transgressing human-imposed spatial boundaries. They invade human homes, steal food (arguably human babies), breastfeed human babies. Human reactions to these urban nonhuman folk devils[19] are lethal at times as is shown in the novel. Mizanur Rahman's (1931- 1996) vignettes of childhood memories in old Dhaka testify that human residents even shot and killed monkeys back then to end the monkey menace (qtd. in Rahman 21). A similar event takes place in *Face*, granting textured meanings to the place of occurrence.

Spatial manifestations of this human-nonhuman tension are the borderlands in metropolitan cities. Monkeys live in what Wolch terms "patchwork habitats of the metropolitan borderlands" in old Dhaka (731). I return to this issue of "human-animal spatial orderings" with respect to *Face* in chapter two. There I explain how their high concentration in the mohallas of old Dhaka speaks to the concept of "a subaltern animal town" ("Zoöpolis" 125). As such, Tanti Bazar, Shankhari Bazar, Gandaria (especially near Sadhana herbal medicine factory), Banagram, Bangshal Road, Johnson Road, Tipu Sultan Road, Narinda, and Farashganj, among others, make

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[19] For the use of the term, I am indebted to Goode and Ben-Yehuda who argue that folk devils are social deviants allegedly involved in "evil practices". They are held responsible for "menacing society's culture, way of life, and central values" (2). For a more nuanced deliberation, see *Moral Panics* (1-35).

up an animal town[20] where the monkeys' presence and beastly activities provide differing meanings and assertions for themselves and humans. Yet popular notion suggests that monkeys are either a nuisance that needs to be eliminated or a heritage object for dominant cultures. In a newspaper interview, a makeshift tea-stall owner close to Sadhana attests to this,

> Residents get frustrated with the monkeys' disturbance but I don't want them removed from the area. They've been a part of Puran [old] Dhaka for generations, since my father and grandfather's time. They're a part of our heritage. (Chowdhury)

This echoes a policeman in *Face* who harbors a similar notion. In my second chapter, I demonstrate that monkeys are not just residual objects to maintain old Dhaka's dominant meaning as a heritage site. They are also active place-making agents. Like monkeys in *Face*, crows and ravens in "Woodcutter" create a colony in the courtyard of Akalu and Tepi who later collect metal scraps, wires, steel, and gold jewelry from their nests. There too the complexity of human-nonhuman relations layer the place of occurrence with a multitude of meanings. Also, a transaction beyond anthropomorphic terms thus takes place between humans and nonhumans. This research seeks to investigate how the presence and absence of animals affect human perceptions of neighborhoods in the old city and whether those perceptions vary from the nonhuman meanings of those spaces. That is, it attempts to close read the nonhuman inscription of signs and symbols in the urban text[21] that is largely dominated by anthropocentric[22] readings.

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[20] During Rahman's childhood, there was even a small area called Banortuli, literally meaning 'monkey area' (20).

[21] The term "urban text" appears in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. de Certeau posits that ordinary practitioners of the city inscribe the urban text but cannot read it, and "the networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other" (93).

[22] Wolch argues that animals rarely figure in urban geographical studies, be it "mainstream or Marxist, neoclassical or feminist". To illustrate, she reads the Marxian varieties of urban theory as anthropocentric for

There is a considerable risk of attributing human qualities to animals while talking about nonhuman agency and intentionality. To avoid making the very mistake this research seeks to address, I use "transgression" instead of "resistance" to signify their free will and reactions to human-imposed spatial boundaries. My position in this regard is broadly informed by Tim Cresswell's demarcation of the terms. Cresswell defines transgression as "crossing lines" in both metaphorical ("social boundaries", such as "norms, conventions, and expectations") and material (socio-spatial boundaries) senses (qtd. in Philo 656). At times, animals wriggle out of their designated places and expected roles, becoming out of place themselves. My thesis delves into this issue of out-of-placeness with regard to monkeys, crows, and ravens in the final chapter. As for the definition of resistance, Cresswell states that it involves "intention" or "purposeful action" (qtd. in Philo 656). It is impossible to know what an animal thinks (humans and animals do not think alike[23] and both have different meaning systems), so I avoid using this word for nonhumans. In the case of humans, I use the terms interchangeably. All this is to acknowledge both human-animal differences and similarities in terms of their social construction of space, place, and culture. Wolch elucidates, quoting Barbara Noske, that "animal constructs are likely to be markedly different from ours but may be no less real" (qtd. in "Zoöpolis" 121). Weighing in the risks and complexities of interpreting nonhuman placemaking, I turn to Cosgrove's instructions about approaching alternative landscapes.

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treating the urban space as a "human stage for capitalist production, social reproduction of labor, and capital circulation and accumulation" ("Zoöpolis" 119). For a succinct analysis, see Wolch and Emel (119-38).

[23] To the question "what is it like to be a bat?", Thomas Nagel answers that there is no way to find out their innermost thoughts just as it is impossible to know people's inner desires (qtd. In Wolch 734). Questions of race, class, or gender further complicate this understanding ("Zoöpolis" 122). Therefore, in "Zoöpolis", Wolch stresses the need to recognize that humans and nonhumans are similar in many ways as they are different from each other. She adds that considering only their physical differences is reductive and that it is "an unforgivable tactic" commonly used against women. Also, attempting to minimize human-nonhuman differences runs the risk of anthropomorphizing animals (121).

To reveal the meanings in the cultural landscape requires the imaginative skill to enter the

world of others in a self-conscious way and then re-present that landscape at a level

where its meanings can be exposed and reflected upon. (124)

This is to circumvent the problems of a singular way of seeing and reading space, place,

and landscape and to unearth previously neglected senses of places and cultural symbolisms of

the powerless. Bringing human geography in dialog with animal geography, this study re-

enchants the space of old Dhaka by re-inserting[24] the nonhuman lived dimension into

geographical inquiries. My thesis celebrates the heterogeneity of spatial meanings to challenge

the dominant culture's notions of space as the single most objective and truest understanding of

landscape.

Scholars such as Sandeep Banerjee and Subho Basu[25] have worked on dominant

representations of Indian cities and diachronic changes in spatial perspectives in the context of

colonial India. Like spatial representation, much scholarly attention has been drawn to the

representations of urban animals in the field of animal geography. Wolch, for instance,

demonstrates how the presence of salmon in Seattle is crucial for the making of places (729).

Here she focuses on the human perception of the nonhuman rather than the nonhuman's use of

that space. I come back to this analysis while talking about nonhuman agency in the second

chapter. At this juncture, my thesis departs from concentrating on the representation of spaces

and of animals and instead enquires about various uses of space (creative and transgressive)

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[24] I recall Wolch and Emel's call for bringing animals back both into the city and the urban geographical studies ("Zoöpolis" 125).

[25] See Banerjee and Basu's "The City as Nation: Delhi as the Indian Nation in Bengali *bhadrolok* Travelogues 1866-1910". See also Banerjee's "Tales of a city: writing colonial Calcutta" from *Space, Utopia, and Indian Decolonization: Literary Pre-Figurations of the Postcolony*.

leading to the construction of social space[26]. Further, it globalizes[27] animal geography addressing nonhuman spatial operations from South Asia. Voices from South Asia are rare in animal geography. Notable among the few are the works of Maan Barua on media representation of human-elephant conflict[28]. However, in most cases, their focus has been on representations rather than on uses of space.

Just as globalizing animal geography addresses the silences and bias in knowledge production, this study's overall preoccupation with constructing a total image of old Dhaka speaks to the acts of cultural domination and subordination. The research seeks to recover alternative symbols, meanings, and attachments at the scale of the mohalla to offer multiple facets of social experience.

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[26] In many ways, place and social space play similar roles (Cresswell 10).
[27] Hovorka calls for decolonizing animal geography scholarship. See Hovorka (388-89).
[28] See Barua's "Whose Issue? Representations of Human-Elephant Conflict in Indian and International Media" and "Bio-Geo-Graphy: Landscape, Dwelling, and the Political Ecology of Human-Elephant Relations".

1   Human excluded groups and many manifestations of old Dhaka

A decade after the 1971 war, old Dhaka, for the residents of Lakshmi Bazar and the neighboring

mohallas in *Life*, is a space of haunting memories and claustrophobia. When the mohalla folk

uses Victoria Park as a site for extra-judicial punishment five days after the war officially ended,

they add another layer to its manifold symbolic meanings given by the city's dominant and

alternative cultures throughout history. That is to say, the park too, like the entirety of old Dhaka,

is a "textured place"[29]. It is not a place frozen in the nawabi period just as commercial media

tend to portray. Then, for the small-scale factory owners in the 1960s[30], like Haji Abdur Rashid

in "History", old Dhaka mohallas figure as a space of labor, or a disenchanted, merchandised

space. But the informal uses, meanings, and attachments of the working and lower-middle

classes make it a dwelling. Various spatial practices—transgressive, creative, or tactical[31]—of

ordinary practitioners thus accord it various cultural meanings. And then, in small residential

units like the mohalla, old Dhaka, through an extended oral communication system, becomes a

center for magic and myth. In this chapter, I examine Shahidul Zahir's *Life and Political Reality*,

"The History of Our Cottage Industry", and *I See the Face* to uncover semiotic articulations of

excluded groups, in other words, "many manifestations of 'place'" (Cresswell 5).

Taking Denis Cosgrove's methodological approach, I intend to read landscape through

the lens of literary interpretation, treating it "as an intentional human expression composed of

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[29] I am indebted to Cosgrove (119) for the use of the expression.

[30] The timeline is not explicitly stated in "History". Apart from the opening sentence "we recall the industrialization of our moholla" (27), other temporal markers are the films: *Chanda* (1962), *Talash* (1963) and *Naginir Prem* (1969) watched by the moholla's men at Rupmahal (37) and Nishat cinemas (52) respectively.

[31] This comes from Michel de Certeau's concepts of strategy and tactics. For an elaboration of the terms, See de Certeau (xix-xx).

many layers of meaning[32]" (120). My reading of *Life* traces the articulations of old Dhaka as a

site of oppression as well as a space of resilience in the face of cruelty and hardship. I argue that

this way of seeing old Dhaka challenges its dominant iteration as antiquated and proclaims that it

is coeval with its newer counterpart. In studying "History", I investigate the ways in which

small-scale factory workers, street vendors, and ordinary mohalla folk make a living place out of

areas envisioned as homogenized, commercial spaces by the dominant groups, in this case,

factory owners. Further, I seek to understand the significance of communication in the forms of

gossip and rumor in a community. To that end, I will focus primarily on *Face* and occasionally

refer to *Life* so as to lay out the manners in which a knowable community can counter prevailing

power structures. For this, I turn to Raymond Williams and Bonnie Brennen. My constellation of

texts seeks to understand how excluded cultures[33] convey their symbolic meanings through

various uses of space and how those meanings are re-presented in Zahir's cartographic

imagination.

Resolving discontinuity between the old and the new

Life opens in 1985, fourteen years after the liberation war, in Lakshmi Bazar, a mohalla that is

now a memorial to the ravages of war and the rampages of razakars or collaborators[34]. Those

who survived observe presently that the local collaborator and his son are leading a political

party. The opening thus presents old Dhaka as a site of haunting memories for the survivors.

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[32] Cosgrove notes that "our geography misses much of the meaning embedded in the human landscape, tending to reduce it to an impersonal expression of demographic and economic forces". He instructs us to apply "to the human landscape some of the interpretative skills we deploy in studying a novel, a poem, a film or a painting, of treating it as an intentional human expression composed of many layers of meaning" (120).

[33] Here I take Cosgrove's deliberation of excluded culture as that of a group that "are actively or passively suppressed", for example, "the cultures of crime, drugs or fringe religious groups" (125) or "gays or freemasons or prostitutes" (133).

[34] During the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war, a group of Bengalis and Biharis joined forces with the Pakistani military and participated in a campaign of genocide.

One day in 1985, the sandal on the foot of Abdul Mojid, a young man from Lakshmi

Bazar's Shyama Prosad Chowdhury Lane, lost conformity with circumstances and went

phot and snapped… His senses then became alert to something else; he heard the sound

of a loudspeaker close by. Like every other person present at that moment on Nawabpur

Road, he looked towards the source of the sound, and there, in front of him, across the

road, next to the Police Club, he spotted Abul Khayer with a microphone in his hand.

Abdul Mojid saw Abul Khayer sitting on a stationary rickshaw and speaking with a

microphone held near his mouth, his words emanating explosively from the large speaker

placed atop the hood of the rickshaw. (Zahir 3-4)

Here visual and auditory registers direct our attention to existing power relations

expressed through spatial arrangements. Abul Khayer, from his panoptic[35] position on a

rickshaw, continues a political campaign using a microphone and onlookers observe silently

from down the street. His rickshaw stationed near the Police Club, a spot not typically used for

this purpose, announces his authority through his spatial appropriation. By this, his dominance is

expressed and exerted over the silent observers. Seeing this sight protagonist Abdul Mojid

undergoes a crisis metaphorically expressed through the snapping of his sandal strap. His

helpless condition as an individual within the larger social context flashes before his eyes as

memories come to haunt him fourteen years later. Mojid, like the residents of Lakshmi Bazar, is

powerless in the face of 'political reality' and his locality establishes itself as a site of hegemonic

control for those at the receiving end.

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[35] Michel Foucault suggests that knowledge and power are linked to the ways we use space and place. For a comprehensive analysis, see *Discipline and Punish*.

An interplay of sound and silence in the extract further demarcates the excluded from the dominant cultures. The right to voice political ideologies gives war criminals such as Moulana Bodu and his son Abul Khayer power over the production and transmission of knowledge. That is, they can alter history in their favor. The very scenario signifies an act of overwriting history. Abul Khayer's use of the space where his father executed a carnage fourteen years back and his choice of words such as "*Bhaishob*" or brothers (12) to address those who suffered in the war in themselves are active attempts at creating collective amnesia, a denial of the atrocities in the past, a hypocritical contradiction. In such a situation, we see the narrator's repeated protest in a refrain: "the people of the moholla remembered" (8) or "all of them recalled" (17). But the fact that they silently remember everything points to the active and passive suppression of their voices as it happens to most excluded groups in diverse contexts (Cosgrove 125). This dichotomy between the dominant and the excluded, or the oppressor and the oppressed, find expression in an analogy Zahir introduces in the following sentences. Abdul Mojid

> observed that the lacklustre afternoon sky above Nawabpur was clouded by termites, and
> that there were countless crows gambolling behind the fleeing termites. It occurred to him
> that because of the screeches of the crows and the soundless striving of the termites to
> escape, a kind of a sense of silent panic pervaded the melancholy afternoon at Nawabpur
> Road. (Zahir 3)

This takes us on an auditory journey through Nawabpur Road. The image of screeching crows and silent termites indicating the power dynamic between collaborators and old Dhaka residents projects the landscape as a space of claustrophobia, of silent remembrance, of oppression. It later becomes clearer through the protagonist's feeling of entrapment and eventual

escape from the locality and his past. This power dynamic expressed through sound and silence figures succinctly in Aratrika Das's analysis.

> The theme of brute force as the only means to achieve control is implied due to the prominence of the claustrophobic noises on the page: they are suffocating. It makes sense that Khayer's is a world of sounds. Abdul Mojid's world has a slow dissipation of sounds.

Das further argues that the repetitive reminders that "the people of Lakhsmi Bazar remembered" (Zahir 5) throughout the narrative reinforces the silence, "making the memories of a massacre still and soundless". But who are these silent onlookers, or the excluded groups in Zahir's narrative world? Zahir creates a sense of the city through its occupants more than through its built environment. His old Dhaka is a place for women, cowards, minors, minorities, elderlies, hijras[36]. Unlike popular narratives of the 1971 war, Zahir is not interested in a black-and-white rendition of a battle between good and evil. Freedom fighters occupy a small space in his novella. Instead, he portrays the helplessness of grown men in the face of ruthless violence. His old Dhaka is a pluralistic society in which, before the war, Mayarani Malakar's mother used to offer prasad[37] to mohalla's children, Hindu or Muslim or anyone from any other religion, who waited in her courtyard for her invocations of God Shani to complete.

> Once the worship was completed in this way, Mayarani used to bring a large bowl and place a single lump of chira soaked in milk with mashed bananas in the outstretched

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[36] Transperson
[37] Religious offering

palms of the boys and girls waiting in the compound, including Abdul Mojid sitting on

the wall. (24)

There is a sense of lost utopia in Abdul Mojid's ruminations above. As he reminisces

about his childhood days, he still believes that if he stretches out his hand, "the dark-skinned and

sillylooking Mayarani [will] place the prasad in his hand in the same way" (24). Through this,

the location acquires a meaning of safety, of religious harmony. It is a place where Mojid's sister

Momena, a Muslim girl, joins Basanti Gomez to sing in a choir at St Gregory's School (13).

However, the fissure along religious and racial lines appears when the war breaks out between

the east (now Bangladesh) and the west wings of Pakistan. Mojid's childhood utopia shatters and

the religious, ethnic, and gendered chasms loom larger. Old Dhaka turns into a space of horror.

People of Lakshmi Bazar begin to discover severed human body parts on the pavement, rooftop,

and even in the rice pot! People first learn about human flesh falling from the sky from Khwaja

Ahmed Ali who spots on his terrace a piece of meat with a tiny floral gemstone on it (5). After

he buries this unknown woman's piece of flesh, a pedestrian notices a hijra's severed toe "with

long and hard nail" and "a thick tuft of hair over" it on the sidewalk (6). Then Jomir Byapari's

teenage daughter discovers a cut-off circumcised penis inside a rice pot left beside the well for

the rice to be washed (6). After that, the narrator reveals that the first person who dies in the

mohalla is Muslim and minor (7). The four incidents introduce war victims as women, hijra,

Muslim men, and minors. Later the Pakistani army kills Khwaja Ahmed Ali, an elderly, as he

delivers azan[38] (61). While some Muslim people are massacred and others, who are like Moulana

Bodu, are spared, mohalla folk finds themselves in a fix, and "this confusion of theirs persisted

all their lives" (18). They find themselves questioning the source of this hatred. Religion or race

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[38] Muslim call to prayers

or political power, whatever the reasons are, mass killing allows us to trace dominant and alternative cultural expressions left on the landscape. After all, space is scarcely innocent, as Foucault contends, and that power and knowledge are tied to the various ways (exclusion, inclusion, isolation, etc.) in which space and place are used (qtd. in Wolch and Emel xiv). In that case, the collaborator's project of removing tulsi or basil plants from every house in Lakshmi Bazar is a symbolic way of asserting dominance and control.

Tulsi plant stands in for various landscape symbolisms. In a Hindu household, tulsi plant is a sacred symbol to supplicate God's grace for prosperity and protection. For non-Hindus, it is an aromatic herb with medicinal qualities. In *Life*, it becomes an object of abhorrence that needs to be removed. On noticing a fellow razakar chewing on a tulsi leaf, Moulana Bodu comments, "*Tulsigachh hindura puja kore, ei gachh hindu gachh.* Hindus worship the tulsi plant, this is a Hindu plant" and orders to cut down all tulsi plants from the locality (71). By excluding this landscape element, he reasserts his dominance over space in a manner of symbolic religious cleansing. Excluded groups, or those without political power in general in *Life*, that is, the silent spectators, also engage in another form of cleansing that takes place in Victoria Park. Their appropriation of the park to execute a war criminal four days after the war officially ended transcends social and civil boundaries as it defies the "agreed-upon" spatial "signifiers" of a "hegemonic landscape[39]" (*In Place/out of Place* 57).

Victoria Park is an amalgamation of multiple dominant and alternative landscape expressions throughout history. When the residents of Lakshmi Bazar complete the public trial of collaborator Abdul Goni in the park, they encode a new meaning to the place. On 21 December

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[39] Cresswell describes the hegemonic landscape as a landscape replete with "a set of structurally 'agreed-upon' signifiers" that are "constantly contested and negotiated" owing to a continuous "struggle between dominant and subordinate cultural groups" (*In Place/out of Place* 57).

1971, they first detain Goni at St Gregory's School to extract information about the twenty-one

people who went missing during the war. They tie him up with a rope in the school and when he

refuses to divulge information, they take him to Victoria Park to initiate an elaborate information

extraction strategy. Their acts transform the school and the municipal park into a people's court.

> [Abdul Goni] was then taken to Victoria Park and was laid, face down, on a concrete
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> bench there. He was laid in such a way that his head stuck out. After that, he was tied to
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> the bench with a rope; a low table was kept beneath his face, and a microphone was
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> placed on it, as were three long lists of names, and a bottle of Vita Cola with a straw that
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> was within reach of his mouth. After that, his lungi was lifted up and the muzzle of a
>
> freedom fighter's SLR was shoved in. People from all directions then gathered at the
>
> steps and dais of the memorial pillar to martyred soldiers and in the expanse of green
>
> grass below that. (Zahir 32)

The mention of "memorial pillar" in the final sentence of the extract recalls the dominant

and residual meanings of the landscape but the actions in that very spot are invested with an

affective charge that gives the memorial *a sense of place*. It no longer remains a place of

memory, suspended in time, but becomes a place for avenging war violence. These are the

people who later become silent listeners to Moulana Bodu's political speech. The same people

who are powerless in the wider political game use the park "against its dominant and 'proper'

heteronormative construction" (Morris 678) when an opportunity arises. I view this as an act of

tactical[40] spatial appropriation like an opportunity grabbed "on the wing" (de Certeau xix) within

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[40] Brian Morris explicates the de Certeauian concept of strategy and tactics through an example of activities in a park. He identifies strategy as a local statutory authority's power and control over maintaining a park's prescribed conventions. Other activities that go against the agreed-upon rules are tactics, such as "the use of city parks and their paths as 'unofficial' homosexual beats, sites for cruising, a practice of walking (already an

"networks of surveillance" (de Certeau 96). Although this is a historically charged event that takes place in post-war Bangladesh making such transgressions likely to happen in such circumstances, the incident is culturally meaningful as are other tactical operations in space.

After learning from Goni the whereabouts of the twenty-one people who went missing in the war, a significant portion of the crowd heads to Christian Cemetery in Narinda to excavate their corpses and bury them again with proper rituals. By the time the crowd returns, they discover Goni's severed head lying in the dirt (64). While the avenger remains unknown, unnamed, the mohalla folk collectively remove all traces of the killing from the ground, uprooting the grasses where "the tiniest drop of dark red blood had coagulated" and sprinkling "[bleaching] powder on the bench" and soil to "[cleanse] everything" (64). They put Abdul Goni's dead body and severed head on a mat to throw them into the Buriganga River (65). Like Moulana Bodu's cleansing operation, this cleansing in the park is a way of inscribing historically specific cultural symbolism.

Indeed, places can have "more than one meaning" and these meanings are sometimes in tune and sometimes in contradiction with each other (*In Place/out of Place* 59) as is the case with Victoria Park. Initially named 'Antaghar Maidan', the park and its attendant clubhouse were symbols of the East India Company's power and authority[41] till the mid-nineteenth century. With the change of its name to 'Victoria Park'[42] shortly after the 1857 Uprising, the place stood for

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appropriation of an official style, namely the police on patrol)" (678). In *Life*, the post-war situation makes a scope for another unofficial and atypical use of the park.

[41] 'Antaghar Maidan' was an Armenian recreational ground in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was a billiard club. Because the balls in the game resembled an egg, locals called it 'anta', a variant of 'anda' or egg in Hindi, Urdu, Bangla, and other South Asian languages (Hossain 30). And 'ghar' means house. Together, 'Antaghar' means billiard club. Later, the English purchased the clubhouse from the Armenians (Dani 148).

[42] After the transference of power from the East India Company to the Crown in 1858, the park was named after Queen Victoria (Dani 69). In 1956, the park was renamed the 'Bahadur Shah Park' to commemorate the centenary of the 1857 Uprising (Kumar 184).

British sovereignty. Dominant cultures in different eras thus superimposed their own symbolic meanings over others as a way of establishing their power. For the anti-colonial force, Victoria Park stood as a symbol of national mourning when, following the 1857 Uprising, English colonial rulers publicly executed rebels by hanging them from the trees in the park. For those who reside near the park developed another notion about it. It became a site for supernatural sightings. Hridaya Nath Majumdar recounts:

> …all of them were put to the gallows and the Dacca Mutiny was thus terminated. The Antaghar Maidan being the scene of this tragical occurrences [sic], used to be looked upon with awe by the people of Dhaka, and many superstitious stories were used to be narrated by the people of the surrounding Mahallas – Bangla Bazaar, Shankhari Bazaar, and Kalta Bazaar how the spirits of the departed sepoys used to visit the Maidan during the night and how the groans and awful sounds were used to be heard. These stories were used to be told by the old people and we never dared to go the Maidan after the evening. (qtd in Chatterjee 207)

Majumdar's account articulates how local lore ascribes symbolic meanings that are not dominant but unofficial and popular. This meaning is remediated[43] in mainstream media and literature[44] and it continued to haunt public consciousness until another meaning superseded it decades after its renovation in the 1960s. Following the renovation, people slowly began reusing the park for physical exercise and recreational purposes. During that time, the Dhaka

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[43] In their book *Remediation* (1999), Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin explicate remediation as a process of "refashioning older media" by representing one medium in another (qtd. in Hermann 150).

[44] Akhtaruzzaman Elias's "Ferari" or "The Fugitive" (1976) is a case in point. The story follows a horse carriage driver called Ibrahim Ostagor who spots a beautiful lady at the park waving at him to stop his carriage. As he prepares to respond, a headless apparition of a soldier carries her away into the depths of the palm grove. In like manner, locals associated the site with supernatural sightings for a long time. It was only after its renovation in the 1960s that the old meanings begin to dwindle, make room for new ones.

Improvement Trust erected a Cenotaph symbolizing national mourning for martyred soldiers (Taifoor 22). Alongside these, the park bore and still bears symbolic meanings for various excluded groups such as beggars, prostitutes, and homeless people, among others. It is a place of calm for some. It is a place for walkers and children. And in *Life* in a special historic moment, it is a spot for people's court. In Shahidul Zahir's depiction, old Dhaka is thus a textured place that is not entrapped in a distant nawabi past.

Mass media's iteration of Mughal Dhaka silences other historical and daily events, creating a discontinuity between the two Dhakas. Zahir's historical setting links the old with the new, creating a harmonious whole while keeping their spatial idiosyncrasies intact. His old Dhaka is a plural space filled with people from different ethnic, racial, social, and religious backgrounds. *Face*, for instance, presents the 1980s old Dhaka as a global space, featuring a handful of the last remaining Portuguese families who settled in the subcontinent before the British era. His knowable community accentuates small factory workers, vegetable sellers, car mechanics, public school teachers, kindergarten teachers, ration shop owners, and gardeners at the British council, among others. It is also a space for nonhumans. I will return to the issue of nonhuman use of material space in the next chapter. In this one, I examine the metaphorical use of nonhumans to explain human experience.

In a corrupt space stripped of political representation in postwar Bangladesh, *Life*'s knowable community reconciles with the horrors of the past by creating myths, or an "oppositional memory" that addresses national amnesia (Brennen 36). War criminals like Moulana Bodu in politics[45] have the power to rework history in their favor. Amid this, local

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[45] Two years after the war, Moulana Bodu comes out of his hiding when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announces a general amnesty. In 1980, he joins a political party. In 1972, Bangladesh government passed the Bangladesh Collaborators (Special Tribunals) Ordinance 1972 to execute local collaborators. Under this law, 37,000

myths as counter-memories continue to challenge existing power structures. These stories are spread through the conduit of gossip and rumors in the organic, mohalla community. The following extract intimates this as such:

> The people of Lakshmi Bazar remembered that in 1971, come evening, Moulana Bodu used to smile tenderly and set crows flying in the moholla's sky. Moulana Bodu and his sons used to go up to his rooftop with a plateful of meat. Those who were still there in the moholla then had said that the meat, whose pieces Moulana Bodu flung skywards every day, was human flesh. (Zahir 5)

Before anything else, this description brings up a rooftop's many-layered meanings in a mohalla. It's a space for leisure for the elderly, a playground for children, a space for domestic activities for housewives. It is also a place for human-nonhuman contact as the excerpt shows and I will pick this up in the next chapter while talking about human-nonhuman relations. Rooftop in *Life* assumes another meaning: a place for violence, metaphorically portrayed in the description and materialized when Khwaja Ahmed Ali is killed there. Apart from the rooftop's symbolic meanings, the extract briefly points to the myth-making process in the mohalla[46].

Phrases such as "people of Lakshmi Bazar remembered" and "those who were still there in the moholla then had said" indicate the weaving and transmission of the tales through word of

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were accused and arrested, and among the 2842 trials that took place, only 752 collaborators were sentenced by October 1973 (Morrison 350; Hossain and Siddiki 12). In November that year, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announced a "general amnesty" to those involved in "trivial offenses" (Hossain and Siddiki 12). This allowed the local war criminals to circumvent the criminal law that called for solid evidence of rape, murder, and arson attack. In cases of "disappearances", "unmarked mass graves" and "bodies dumped into the river" producing post-mortem reports proved impossible (Morrison 351). After the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, during the succeeding military regime, Collaborator Ordinance was repealed, and imprisoned collaborators were set free (Morrison 351). Following this act of impunity, many of the collaborators formed political parties in the 1980s, leaving the general people without political agency more vulnerable.

[46] I will discuss this in detail in a domestic geographical context while talking about *Face*.

mouth from generation to generation. Later, when Khwaja Ahmed Ali discovers a piece of flesh

on his rooftop, the narrator reiterates that "everyone in the moholla [learns] about all this later"

(5). Next, Abu Korim's elder son witnesses that an unknown pedestrian finds a hijra's severed

toe lying on the pavement (5). It is always someone else who sees or hears about the incident and

that is how their myth takes shape. Through this oral communication system, they counter the

dominant power as they come to terms with their past. This communication ties them together

and represents old Dhaka as a communitarian space. It is true, as Shahid Amin argues, that "the

speech of humble folk is not normally recorded for posterity" (1). However, in *Life*, Zahir does

exactly so.

Silences and enunciations

"History" illustrates the 1960s old Dhaka in the grip of a change in the social order. As it

begins, a we-narrator[47] introduces the city in action, putting diverse actors and their activities in

one frame. In the following extract, South Moishundi is a space of labor and life, a "counter-

space" (McCann 179), a human-nonhuman contact zone, all at once.

> We recall the industrialization of our moholla, South Moishundi; when the days began to
>
> get hot, it was Chaitra, and in Baisakh or Jaishta, the watermelon vendors arrived with
>
> their watermelons and we began eating them, and thus we became conscious of
>
> watermelons; we would notice that these vendors were inclined to set up their makeshift
>
> shops beside a wall in a narrow part of the street of the moholla and lay out the round
>
> watermelons in small heaps on the ground, but we couldn't figure out why they sat there,

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[47] Bekhta elaborates that the we-narrator presents "a holistic supra-individual" that supplants the I-narrator "'I' speaking on behalf of… a group" and constitutes what Alan Palmer terms a 'social mind'" (qtd in Bekhta 165). In "History" the we-narrator comprises the voice of small factory workers.

and so rickshaws, push- and bullock-carts, babytaxis, dogs, goats and humans created a snarl when they arrived there; (27)

"History", at the outset, signals the development of a wholesale market through mushrooming factories and workshops in the locality. And then it immediately shifts its gaze to the watermelon vendors competing for their own small business space in the "narrow part of the street". Situated within the homogenizing mission of state and capital, small vendors scramble for their own business representation in a way that creates disruption and draws attention to themselves. Their choice of space is an assertion of counter-spaces. It is a statement. This disruption in daily movement turns the spot into a meeting point for various urban dwellers. We notice a concomitant presence of older, such as "push- and bullock-carts", and newer ("babytaxis") modes of transportation, indicating the city's uneven development following the penetration of capitalist modernity. We observe an assemblage of humans and animals. In short, we witness what Lefebvre terms an "explosion of space[48]" ("Space" 290). Various spatial enunciations here make South Moishundi a space full of life and exuberance. As the story advances, auditory and olfactory registers reinforce this image of a merchandised space. The "sound of lathe machines" or "the deep muffled sound of the furnace of the glass factory" (28) and the "sweet aroma" of "the biscuit and lozenge factories" (44) repeatedly puncture the stream of consciousness.

Further intimated in the opening are the area's dominant, emergent, and excluded cultures. The description, as does the story, presents the emergent capitalist social order as indistinguishable from the new elements in the dominant culture, that is a social group with

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[48] Henri Lefebvre argues that in seeking to "negate" all differences, a homogenizing, abstract space makes the contradictions all the more conspicuous, giving rise to an explosion of space ("Space" 289-90).

capital. Williams explains that dominant culture eventually takes over oppositional emergent elements, making it difficult to differentiate between the two (qtd in Brennen 35). In the case of "History", South Moishundi and its neighboring mohallas are lands of economic opportunity for the dominant culture. This perception comes alive when Haji Abdur Rashid

> envisioned the future potential of lathe workshops in the moholla, and he thought that he needed the house standing on the one-and-a-half kattha plot of land that belonged to the old childless widow, Rahima Bibi; ("History" 30)

Rashid's plan to grab Rahima Bibi's property abutting his lozenge factory (32) shows that he takes this land for an unused space waiting to be seized and capitalized. But his dream remains unfulfilled, as Abdul Gafoor inherits the land (32) and after Gafoor's death, the local authority demolishes the house and builds a mosque in its place (52), removing any residue of the past. Within this time, Yakub Ali, the cloth merchant from Patuatuli, installs the fourth lathe machine of the mohalla (48). Factories here are the dominant landscape expressions where power is grounded in the possession of capital. This power is reinforced and sustained by creating a vision of financial security and community feeling, an ideology, communicated through local media (Cosgrove 128). Kafiluddin Byapari organizes a milad[49] after setting up a biscuit factory (43). In this gathering, he entertains his neighbors with "the first biscuits manufactured in this factory", inspiring a community feeling. This affective communication normalizes the ongoing socio-economic changes in the mohalla and earns the acceptance of others, especially the workers. Another time, acceptability is gained through hegemony. In a speech delivered in the Dholaikhal area, the Deputy Prime Minister utters, "We have to value and praise the silent

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[49] Milad is a devotional gathering arranged for prosperity and goodwill. It is organized when someone starts a new business or moves into a new house or remembers deceased family members.

efforts being undertaken in small lathe workshops by the people of Dholaikhal, South Moishundi

and other localities" (35). Alamgir Hossain, the Chairman of the South Moishundi branch of the

Machine Tools Factory Owners' Association, photocopies the speech at his expense (48),

underlines 'South Moishundi' in a red marker, and makes sure the papers are hung on the walls

of all the lathe workshops in their mohalla (35). This act establishes that the Deputy Prime

Minister's utterance of their mohalla's name is a collective achievement and workers consent to

participate in the celebration. Thus, dominant ideology is sustained and reproduced and the

supply of labor is ensured. When Haji Raisuddin erects his Haji Food Products Company, the

we-narrator stresses "fifteen to twenty people from our moholla would get jobs there;" (56). It

should be noted that these industrial developments in the story are coeval with Dhaka's

northward expansion to Gulshan (1961), Banani (1964), and Uttara (1965) (Kabir 9). A few

years earlier in 1954, the Motijheel area in old Dhaka emerged as a commercial zone. Around

this time, Dani recorded the city's development, hoping that "in the final scheme… the old and

new town will be linked together and the whole would appear as a harmonious and well-planned

city" (84).

Also noteworthy is the fact that the story does not clearly mention its setting in the

Pakistan period[50]. Films are the only temporal markers in the narrative and the two Urdu

language films *Chanda* (1962) and *Talash* (1963) are the only representatives of West Pakistani

culture. Silences and absences in a story reveal how an author seeks to project a landscape. The

absence of a strong presence of West Pakistani culture in Zahir's cartographic imagination is his

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[50] After the Partition of India in 1947, East Bengal (now Bangladesh) becomes an eastern part of Pakistan. Their ties sever in the 1971 war and Bangladesh emerges as an independent country.

way of prioritizing East Pakistani culture over the former. This negation also pushes back against West Pakistan's economic, cultural, and political oppressions.

What Zahir highlights instead are people whose geography includes lived places (residential buildings, cinema halls, small factories, departmental stores, etc.) rather than architectural landmarks. "History" catalogs five cinema halls and four schools and *Face* registers eight educational institutions. *Life* pays close attention to creating routes and reroutes through winding lanes and by-lanes, but it leaves out major monumental edifices and archeological ruins, such as the Binat Bibi Masjid (1457 AD), a pre-Mughal Sultanate era establishment (Dani 12). His inclusions and exclusions create a space where the experiential and the immediate preside over the residual and the historical. In fact, culture can be reproduced through "simple recognition of buildings, [and] place names" (Cosgrove 129).

In mohalla or community culture, renaming sites through repeated use is an organic act of place-making. Replacing old signifiers with new ones attaches new meanings to a landscape[51]. When a house no. 32 in *Face* becomes "the 'Tiger' house on No. 32" (480) it becomes a dwelling. Similarly, Hatkhola Road in the same novel is locally called the Nari Shikkha Mandir's Lane (Women's Education Institute Lane) because of its proximity to the eponymous school, presently known as Sher E Bangla Balika Mahavidyalaya School and College. Zahir's use of unofficial place names once again gives precedence to local landscape expressions.

Local excluded/dominant binary in "History" is predicated on the possession of power or capital. There, focalization occurs through factory workers in a collective gaze. These are the people who work at lathe or glass workshops or shops selling old spare parts or electrical

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[51] "Naming is one of the ways space can be given meaning and become place," notes Cresswell (9).

appliances (37). Here too Zahir introduces polyvocality through repetition, such as phrases like "we remembered" (28). Like *Life*, this repetition holds out social harmony and cohesion, but its tone is not accusatory in this case. It is slightly approving, slightly sardonic. Its tone signals how the mohalla folk perceives the changing circumstances and how their use of time and space transgresses capitalist conventions.

As they appreciate and accept modern amenities of global capitalist modernity, they become increasingly critical of its attendant problems. Grinders, blenders (50), and refrigerators (52) find a place in their homes. English films (41) and imported items tie the local with the global. At the same time, prices of daily requirements, such as rice, dal, and watermelon, increase; taxes are levied; duties on imported items increase by twenty percent later amounting to forty-five percent; prices of truck tires, tubes, and spare parts skyrocket (49-50); and watermelons are adulterated. They begin to question the downside of modernity as they

> were confronted with the dilemma of choosing between two kinds of watermelons, something [their] fathers weren't, since in those days, there was only one kind of watermelon. (29)

With a hint of nostalgia for the 'good old days' this extract indicates the variety of options globalization offers while discounting the quality of products. Again, a sense of lost utopia dictates their conscience. At first, when capitalism hegemonizes their aural/olfactory faculties through "the noise and sweet fragrance" of milad, biscuit, and lozenge factories and workshops (43), they welcome the change with enthusiasm. Over time, their initial enthusiasm turns into suspicion. They start to see through the veneer of glamor the limitations of global

capitalist modernity. Like the motif of the watermelon, "History" pictures this distrust in an analogy.

> that afternoon we saw Putul standing at one end of their outer veranda and looking over the wall towards Abdul Gafoor's house; when she turned to look at us, the grace of her beautiful, fair-skinned face and the black mole on her upper lip perturbed us, but as we looked downwards, we saw her disabled leg dangling in her shalwar; we figured that Aminul Haque, who was across the wall, could only see the girl's face, he couldn't see the lower part with the leg resting on a staff, and that's how the incident occurred; (44)

Hermeneutics of suspicion suggests that the mohalla folk only *saw* the superficial aspects of capitalism at its outset like Aminul Haque could see the "grace" of Putul Begum's "beautiful, fair-skinned face and the black mole on her upper lip". They considered it through the prospect of employment, but their economic utopia proves otherwise with the change in the quality of their lives and food. They can finally *see* its limitations as Aminul

> discovered that the woman was lame, but there was no way for him to turn back then, because the number of people in the moholla grew, work began in the lathe machine workshops. (47)

The final sentence underpins the previous analogy, juxtaposing factory work with Aminul Haque's love affair. Their epiphany fuels them to transgress capitalist time and space. They carve out a space for leisure in a fast-moving world. When time is an asset to capitalist relations of production, they while away that asset haggling over watermelons.

> we would take a watermelon in the cup of our hands and try to guess how much it weighed, and looking vacantly towards the sky, try to master the skill of figuring out the

correlation between the weight of a watermelon and the quality of its inner substance.

(28)

Actions such as "try[ing] to guess how much it weighed" by putting a watermelon in their hand and then "looking vacantly towards the sky" read hyperbolic so as to indicate their deliberate attempts at spending an excessive amount of time buying or haggling over watermelons. This can be an act of inserting a space of leisure in an increasingly capitalist landscape to deflect the pressures of factory work. Another time, when a green-colored lorry carrying bricks for the construction of Abdur Rashid's lathe workshop gets stuck in a pothole, they flock around the lorry "like the watermelon flies to watch the spectacle;" (46). Children moreover create their own space shattering the "silence" with an "uproar" amid the "sound of the lathe machines" (28). They turn the streets into a playground for their games such as *gollachut* (28) and cops-and-robbers (48). Sand for construction becomes their plaything as they scale the wall of the temple to jump into it (29). Spatial activities such as these use dominant landscape elements for their own interest and purpose that are at variance with the dominant culture's socio-spatial homogenizing tendency. Further, their furore fractures the mohalla's disenchanted image, turning it into a dwelling.

Face provides the clearest instance of resistance to capitalist relations. There, through Chan Miya's use, a space of work becomes a place of personal indulgence. As a mechanic at a motor garage in Kaltabazar, he test-drives the cars sent for repair. He disrupts routine to satisfy his driving urge using the cars "for his own profit". In other words, he "diverts time from the factory" for work that is "free" "and precisely not directed toward profit" (de Certeau 25). For

him, the workspace is a place to pursue dreams. His act of *la perruque*[52] represents an individual

response to the penetrations of the state and business in everyday life. His action superimposes

the excluded on the dominant cultural meaning.

However, excluded groups in one context can become dominant in another. Factory

workers in South Moishundi are the excluded group compared to the powerful position of the

factory owners whose landscape elements reshape urban configuration. However, in the case of

the rural/urban divide, the same mohalla folk becomes authoritative when they decide whom to

accept into their community. In an increasingly globalized urban area, rural people like Abdul

Gafoor and his family are outsiders. Their cultures are actively or passively repressed (Cosgrove

(125). For residents, old Dhaka is a space of opportunity where social relations are built in the

shared feeling of distrust of outsiders. For Abdul Gafoor's family arriving from the countryside

in Dohar or Nawabganj (32), it's a dog-eat-dog world in which they are a misfit.

Their unconventional career choices impede their assimilation. When others conform to

the changing circumstances, joining workshops and factories as workers, Abdul Gafoor's

profession sets him apart from others' shared values. This establishes his family as 'them' in the

mohalla.

> seeing the small and frail figure of Abdul Gafoor, we thought that he wouldn't look bad
>
> as the owner of a shop selling motor parts or electrical appliances, but perhaps the flies

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[52] de Certeau defines *la perruque* as "the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer." This is not the same as "absenteeism" for the worker is "officially on the job". They cannot be accused of stealing anything of material value. He only "diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps)" from his workplace "for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit" (25). It is an activity as simple as "a secretary's writing a love letter on 'company time'" or "as complex as a cabinetmaker's 'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room" (25). Yet often, workers who perform *la perruque* are charged with "stealing or turning material to [their] own ends" (25) as can be observed in the case of Chan Miya. At one point, the garage owner hits him with his shoe for returning "half an hour or an hour later" after test-driving (154). Yet he sticks around and continues to indulge in *la perruque* to gratify his compulsion. It eventually comes to an end when he resorts to car-lifting.

had annoyed him, and as a result we observed that he became indifferent towards us and began working as a teacher in the Narinda Primary School. (32-33)

As can be seen, the community sees his decision as indifference toward them. Later, his indifference is again portrayed through the analogy of the watermelon. Gafoor does not participate in their shared appreciation for watermelons. He calls the mohalla folk "greedy watermelon gobblers" and the latter calls his family "a tribe of madcaps" (42) because of their professional pursuits. His elder son, Azizul Haque is a poet who comes out in the street "without a lungi[53]" and then neighbors transfer him to the Pabna lunatic asylum (43). Aminul Haque, the younger son, is a flautist who dies of snakebite (History 55). And his daughter Shefali Akhtar who tends flowers disappears from the narrative. The we-narrator nostalgically regrets, "we screamed out, 'Hello Shefali Flowering Plant,' but she was not to be found any longer, we had lost her," (56). The family's fate correlates with the condition of individual craftsmanship and leisure pursuits in a space of labor. The previous quote attests to its allegorical resonance[54].

The image of the outsider helps cement the image and solidarity of the community. Repugnance for the rural brings the community together. Their disgust becomes apparent in the rumor Alamgir Hossain's wife spreads in the mohalla. She claims that on returning from a meeting of the factory owners' association that took place near Bera or Ullapara or Sherpur, her husband witnessed a village "peasant" defecating in the watermelon field (45). The rumor upsets the mohalla folk, aggravating their prejudice. Their remark to watermelon vendors, "Why are the village folk so filthy?" illuminate the country/city divide as it defines what urban connotes: sanitation, civilization, modernization.

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[53] an outer garment to cover the lower half of the body
[54] My use of "allegorical resonance" echoes Fredric Jameson's concept of the national allegory (71).

The short story ends with two major deaths: Abdul Gafoor's suicide and Haji Abdur Rashid's natural death, crystallizing the mohalla's dominant image as a commercial space specific to that period. After Gafoor's death, a mosque replaces his house removing all the traces of those who cannot adapt to the changing times. Rashid's death prompts his son Haji Raisuddin to set up a factory for canned watermelons to supply throughout the year in his father's memory. Raisuddin reassures that "fifteen to twenty people from [their] moholla would get jobs there" (56). After that, with the sudden lively appearance of the children, the story concludes. All these seemingly disconnected events point to the place's contradictory images as both dwelling and functional space. *Face* likewise illustrates the community's placemaking projects. It allows us to conduct a domestic geographical investigation to understand women as excluded groups and the home as the birthplace of urban legends.

Faces of community

Face charts many other articulations of space and community through extended oral communication systems, such as gossip, rumors, and lore. Among other themes, the novel documents the development of two central myths within domestic spaces and the world outside. Having originated in semi-private areas, such as the kitchen, terrace, and courtyard, through small conversations among neighbors in between household chores, these legends turn the home into a site for labor and leisure, before traveling outside. Local fantastical stories contain historically specific issues, experiences, and concerns of the ordinary. In the cluster of mohallas near Narinda in *Face*, undercurrent urban legends become "oppositional forces" (Brennen 35) to dominant and reductive cultural constructions of old Dhaka.

Hegemonic forces, such as mass media, continuously renew, recreate, and defend their construction (Brennen 35) of the old city as a memorial of the Mughal past. As is shown in the introduction, myths disseminated by mass media, one way or the other, concern the nawabi or the Mughal traditions. Zahir snaps out of this trend, charting mohalla-centered myths instead. The fact that these myths do not involve any heroic historic figure suggests that the mohalla folk do not dwell in the bygone years but in the present. Spanning the years between the 1960s and the early 2000s, *Face* illustrates the ways in which excluded groups use this metaphorical space to articulate a breadth of cultural meanings tied to the material space. In this, excluded groups are sometimes women in domestic sphere and sometimes porters and laborers of the sawmill. In essence, they are people whose voices are overshadowed by the voice of the authority or the dominant cultural media.

Previously I briefly explored issues of collective memory and amnesia in light of Brennen's essay[55] through *Life*'s knowable community. This section examines the legends of the monkey boy and Rabbit Mamun tracing the creation and circulation of a knowable community through oral communication. In *Face*, Zahir "reactivate[s] archaic and residual forms", such as gossip and lore, "to challenge, disrupt, compound, supplement and supersede the dominant (often imposed) forms, in order to convey the palimpsestic, combinatory and contradictory 'order'" of marginalized experience (WReC 72).

The novel opens in a domestic environment, introducing the readers to the legend of the monkey boy in the form of gossip. Moreover, it familiarizes us with Mamun's Ma, Mrs. Zobeida

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[55] Bonnie Brennen's "Communication and the Knowable Community" expounds on the strength of oral history in challenging prevailing ideological constructions of media history.

Rahman, one of the primary producers and circulators of the myth. Her interaction with her son's friend Fakhrul Alam Ledu, now an adolescent, reveals major characteristics of a myth.

> Perhaps Chan Miya, of Ghost Lane, had been nourished by monkey's milk as an infant, because if you ever met someone like, say, Mamun and Mahmud's Ma, Mrs Zobeida Rahman, who was witness to that, at her residence in No. 25, and if the conversation turned to the subject of Chan Miya, she never forgot to say, '*O toh bandorer dudh khaichhilo.* But he was raised on monkey's milk,' and if anyone ever cast doubt on that, she would definitely get into an argument and, if necessary, quarrel. (3)

The description first lays out its spatiotemporal scales: a domestic site, a house, a lane in Narinda, and Mamun's adolescence, indicating that the period is sometime in the early 1980s. The conversation takes place when Ledu goes over to Mamun's house in search of his friend. The emphasis on "if the conversation turned to the subject of Chan Miya" signifies that bringing up the topic is not intentional on Ledu's part but incidental. It further illustrates how myths are kept alive through repetition. Here Zobeida Rahman narrates how the vegetable seller's son, Chan Miya, comes to be known as the monkey boy in the mohalla having been allegedly nourished by a monkey's milk as a baby. His story exposes complex social relationships, fissures in society, and the woman's condition in post-war Bangladesh. Zobeida Rahman, wife of a clerk in a food godown in Koltabazar, is relatively well-off than Khoimon, widow of a vegetable seller. Her gossips point to social stratification based on gender and class, presenting old Dhaka as a hostile place for working single mothers such as Khoimon in the 1980s.

> And it seemed that badmouthing Khoimon was her sole preoccupation, perhaps she said to Fakhrul Alam Ledu or to someone else, 'Just see how cunning the woman is, since she

doesn't have the time to take care of the boy, how cleverly she got a band of wild animals

to do it. "*Khaat tawra, ami aram kori!* You lot work, let me relax!" … This was perhaps

true, or perhaps it wasn't, because it wasn't possible to get so much done by wild

monkeys, but hadn't Khoimon herself said all this to Nurani Bilkis Upoma? (42-43)

As can be seen, myths are created in installments between conversations, and, as they

travel from mouth to mouth, they add layers and flavors. Zobeida Rahman's comment shares that

monkeys suckle and look after baby Chan Miya when Khoimon goes out to sell paper packets in

Thatari Bazar or to borrow cooking materials or food from neighbor Nurani Bilkis Upoma. Other

installments in the legend reveal that the animals bring Chan Miya a bottle of Horlicks,

grapefruit, and a book and play with him when he is in primary school (530). This particular

snippet from Zobeida Rahman's gossip, however, deals with a range of issues, including the

'animal question' that I will take up in the next chapter. More than anything, it gives us a

glimpse into a community that is, unlike any other, not only built in the values and ideas of

solidarity but also "complex relationships that may have been difficult, frustrating and/or

limiting" (Brennen 34). Khoimon belongs to an unkind place for women, where single and

working mothers, without a male head in the family, are called "cunning". Later "low-class"

(129) and "wretch" (138) add to this list of adjectives. Rahman's remark "Just see how cunning

the woman is, since she doesn't have the time to take care of the boy, how cleverly she got a

band of wild animals to do that" shows that Khoimon's independence as an earner is not viewed

in a positive light in the community. The women's situation in old Dhaka in the 1980s repeatedly

comes up as authorial commentary in other situations outside the myth. The narrator comments

that this society devalues women's opinions by saying, "but in this country, a girl couldn't get

married merely by consenting" (18) hinting at the primacy of dowry and decisions of parents and

matchmakers over the bride's consent. Then, when Mamun Miya consistently pursues Julie

Florence Clark, a Bangladeshi-born Portuguese descent, the narrator again comments, "after all

this was a Muslim country, it didn't really matter if one did a bit of all that here with them

["Anglo girls"]" (21). Apart from the 'women's question', *Face* attends to the socio-spatial

experiences of other communities, such as this Portuguese family, in terms of complex human

emotions and a sense of home and belonging. However, this research is limited to the issues of

selective excluded cultures.

Woman's treatment in this society is encapsulated in the use of the word "cunning" to

indicate Khoimon's survival strategies. Being one of the active participators in the creation of the

myth of the monkey boy, she shares her parts in the story with Nurani Bilkis Upoma to gain her

sympathy and borrow her food. To ensure her family is fed, she illegally collects forty extra

ration cards with the help of Upoma's husband who owns a ration shop in Raysha Bazar (138).

> perhaps Khoimon made this up, because she had learnt to make up stories in the course of
>
> telling Upoma Begum about the monkeys, perhaps while chatting with her in the evening
>
> in the kitchen or by the well, when she had nothing more to say, Khoimon narrated these
>
> tall tales, and Upoma Begum didn't believe her, 'You're making it all up,' and then
>
> Khoimon said, 'Please give me some vegetable preparation so I can feed my son!' (130)

Other than Khoimon's participation in mythmaking, this excerpt underlines the location

where these activities take place. "Kitchen" and the indoor "well-side" are part of the home

space where domestic labor and leisure take place. Mythmaking occurs as a secondary activity

during other major works. It is seldom the primary purpose of gathering as can be seen in

Khoimon's case whose primary concern is to extract favor. The spatial configuration of the

mohalla in old Dhaka is conducive to such social interactions. In the 1980s, most residential houses had an indoor courtyard and a well-side, semi-private spaces, where people met and interacted with neighbors and visitors. Today still there are little to no spaces in between buildings. This closeness evokes a sense of intimacy among its dwellers who are well-connected with their neighbors, connected to that level of keeping tabs on others' personal matters. In other words, mohalla's morphology encourages social integration.

In the case of Rabbit Mamun's myth which, too, involves an animal, although indirectly, gossip originates in the sawmill and spreads from Zobeida Rahman's courtyard.

> The foolish, or shrewd, porters from The New Chondraghona Saw Mill & Timber Depot then complicated the matter, and despite the strict prohibition imposed by the proprietor in this regard, … [they] went to Ghost Lane and looked for Mamun's house. They walked around asking people at random, and then finally they arrived at the foot of the flowering kamini tree in the courtyard of the house on No. 25 and called out. (67-68)

Myths and stories are a way to overcome labor-related stress. When porters and laborers from The New Chondraghona Saw Mill & Timber Depot co-create the myth, they in a sense insert the lived and the experiential into the workspace. Aside from that, the myth reveals other grim realities, such as human trafficking, hinted in the words "the strict prohibition of the proprietor in this regard". Rabbit Mamun's story follows a boy named Mamun who is a regular buyer of sawdust for cooking fuel from The New Chondraghona Saw Mill & Timber Depot. Rumor says that one day he falls into the saw pit and the porters and laborers accidentally pack and load him along with smuggled fertilizers on a Chittagong-bound truck. About fifteen days or a month after, porters arrive at Zobeida Rahman's courtyard to inform her. According to the

legend, another Mamun (because one is already living with Zobeida Rahman in old Dhaka) grows up in Chittagong as Asmantara Hoore Jannat's pet rabbit. How he becomes the rabbit follows the story of evading law enforcement. When the second Mamun arrives in Chittagong among smuggled fertilizers, the intelligence reaches the police. Smuggler Abdul Wodood Chowdhury then concocts the tale that a large rabbit, not a human, fell into his truck as it came along a mountainous route. Although it placates the police, it fails to convince his toddler Asmantara who throws a tantrum, and as it transpires,

> Abdul Wodood Chowdhury's servants then had no option then but to bodily pick up Mamun Miya from where he lay on the ground, tie a rope around his neck, and hand him over to Asmantara, and so Mamun Miya became Asmantara's rabbit; (92)

Behind the veneer of magical elements, the legend addresses another portrait of the city as an unsafe space rife with smugglers and traffickers. Although Abdul Wodood Chowdhury is a smuggler, not a human trafficker, the novel later shows how adult Chan Miya meets a human trafficker who gives him false hopes about sending him to Saudi Arabia (150). Later, when bullied in school for being the monkey boy Chan Miya drops out and eventually becomes a car thief in young adulthood, he also chances on Ghasir Bin Ahram, a foreign visitor, and human trafficker while stealing a BMW car. The two legends converge when Mamun arrives in Narinda as an adult and tries to teach Chan Miya and his "monkey brigade" a lesson. My second chapter will elaborate on the interactions among the three parties, keeping my primary focus on interspecies intermingling. Here I have discussed the animal's presence in the metaphorical space. In the next, I will engage with how nonhumans use the material space and leave their imprints on them.

2   Nonhuman engagement in place-making

Encounters, interactions, negotiation

Monkeys in old Dhaka enter domestic space, eat human food, defecate on people's roof terraces. Crows build a colony in an urban courtyard, provide nourishment to human dwellers, supply metal scraps and gold jewelry in a transaction beyond human terms. These snippets from Shahidul Zahir's novel and short story demonstrate interspecies intermingling, interactions, and negotiations in the urban realm. They illuminate nonhuman involvement in the reproduction and re-ascription of landscape symbolism. Denis Cosgrove argues that the "human landscape is replete with the symbols of, and symbolic meaning for, excluded groups" (131). Further, he adds that the domestic landscape has largely evaded geographical inquiry. In this chapter, I seek to address these issues, taking stock of nonhumans as excluded groups whose transgressive acts and movements in and out of domestic space and designated zones confer a range of meanings to space and place.

Cultural geographers working on animal geography bring home the question of the nature/culture divide to show that natural landscapes are not necessarily green as we tend to presume and that nonhuman habitats in the city comprise any space from home to the backyard, courtyard, streets, and alleyways[56]. Monkeys and crows respectively in *I See the Face* and "The Woodcutter and the Ravens" inhabit such urban wildernesses and actively engage in place-making.

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[56] Sheppard and Lynn contend that successful natural landscapes, such as, "glaciers, deserts, volcanoes, and oceans", are not always green as we tend to presume. In the urban context, nonhuman habitats "range from backyards to graveyards, isolated rooftop gardens to networks of public and private lands, and resource-poor urban cores to resource-rich wetlands" (Sheppard and Lynn 54).

On this score, this chapter cogitates on the many ways in which nonhumans, the co-constituents of old Dhaka, use this urban space. Specifically, it encapsulates their operations in the domestic and public spheres. The place of these interactions determines whether the animals are 'in place' or 'out of place'. Generally, human spatial orderings emplace certain nonhumans close to human habitation, keeping others "outside the perimeter of human existence, banished from the vicinity of everyday human life and work" (Philo and Wilbert 10). Placed within such anthropocentric geography, nonhumans nevertheless challenge and disrupt human spatial organizations. This chapter constellates Shahidul Zahir's *Face* and "Woodcutter" to understand how monkeys, crows, and ravens as excluded groups creatively, tactically, and transgressively use the space of old Dhaka. This study brings out a gamut of human perceptions of nonhumans based on the latter's spatial practices. It also demonstrates different and differing symbolic meanings of human and nonhuman groups. In this regard, I turn to Cosgrove's instructions about self-consciously approaching alternative landscapes[57] to decipher and re-present their meanings without anthropomorphizing nonhumans. Indeed, it is difficult to explain their intentions as it is hard to know any person's innermost desires. I, therefore, use the term 'transgression' instead of 'resistance' to explain nonhuman activities that go beyond human codes and conventions of space. My introduction elaborates on my rationale behind this.

Drawing, moreover, on Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert's concept of "beastly places" (13), I first concentrate on nonhuman activities in the private and then on the public arenas to instantiate the nonhuman ways of exceeding cultural and material boundaries put in place to keep animals 'in place'. All this is to showcase the nonhuman attribution of landscape symbolism in

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[57] Congrove instructs that "to reveal the meanings in the cultural landscape requires the imaginative skill to enter the world of others in a self-conscious way and then re-present that landscape at a level where its meanings can be exposed and reflected upon" (124).

the context of old Dhaka with a view to welcoming a plurality of perspectives in understanding

multiple facets of a place.

'Decoding' domestic symbolism

Nonhumans break material boundaries by breaking into human dwellings and using them for

beastly purposes. Their activities within human private and semi-public zones provide variegated

meanings to cultural landscapes. However, their meaning-making activities are not readily

apparent, and they are often "actively or passively suppressed" (Cosgrove 125) by dominant

cultures, in this case, humans in general. Nevertheless, by zooming in on places they frequent

and come in contact with humans can we recover their symbolic assertions. Complex as the

category of the excluded is, some human groups from within the same mohalla community at

times become excluded owing to their close connections with nonhumans. *Face* documents

numerous nonhuman spatial operations presenting old Dhaka as a 'humanimal place' in which

nature permeates urban life and blurs the boundaries between the private and the public. The

novel introduces monkeys as urban animal dwellers in a way that acquaints us with their

peripheral placement in the city by humans.

> there were monkeys in the moholla during Chan Miya's infancy, and those monkeys
>
> could be seen on the roofs and walls of the houses in the moholla, with their brown
>
> backs, whitish bellies and red backsides; they used to walk along walls or lie on the
>
> parapet of some house with their tails dangling. (8)

The passage pictures what Jennifer Wolch and Jody Emel call a borderland, a shared

space between humans and animals, however uneasy that cohabitation may be (qtd. in Michael

282). Monkeys who remain on "the roofs and walls of the houses in the moholla" and "walk

along walls or lie on the parapet of some house with their tails dangling" occupy the margins and

fringes of human property. Their placement suggests a clear division between human and

nonhuman dwellings. It presents an imaginative geography of animals in which excluded

nonhuman groups are consigned to the urban wilderness[58]. Later, their movements out of these

allotted spots mark their defiance of human spatial ordering, suggesting a range of nonhuman

spatial enunciations. When monkeys cross the threshold of human private space, they initiate the

semiotic processes of conferring meaning to cultural landscapes. It must be noted that their

spatial practices change the meanings of places for both humans and nonhumans.

> Returning home with the sugar [borrowed from Nurani Bilkis] that day, Khoimon saw
>
> that the door was unlatched and a troop of monkeys was jostling inside the room. Perhaps
>
> the monkeys had entered the room with a purpose, and if they had found bananas or
>
> radishes inside they would have carried those away; but they had found Khoimon's pot of
>
> cooked rice, so they brought the rice down from the shelf and began to eat it up, (10)

The series of acts, such as unlatching the door, "jostling inside", carrying "bananas or

radishes" away, and eating rice "from the shelf", suggests a transgression of human set limits. It

depicts the mohalla as a competitive space where humans and nonhumans are vying for their

respective share in urban placemaking. The monkeys' behavior further points to the loss of

animal habitat due to urbanization that tends to leave "wild lands and things on the margins"

(qtd. in "Transspecies" 97). From those margins, entering a human house in this way is a tactical

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[58] A city's spatial orderings stipulate an "imaginative geography (Said 54) of animals" (Philo and Wilbert 10) that allows pets or "companion animals" to occupy urban habitat but consigns "wild animals" to the "zones of unoccupied lands beyond the margins of settlement and agriculture", in short, "the wilderness" (Philo and Wilbert 11). According to Huw Griffiths et al., the urban wilderness comprises "derelict landscapes" that are characterized by "a lack of maintenance, with weeds and brambles…, or more densely vegetated vacant land (66).

appropriation of domestic space by means of seizing opportunities on the wing when Khoimon is

not around. Other times, monkeys eat the pumpkin curry and throw the vegetable curry on the

floor (155). Sometimes, when Khoimon catches them red-handed they bare their teeth and snarl

(156). In all cases, monkeys exhibit a level of resistant agency as they continue to assert "their

own 'beastly' ways, ends, doings, joys and sufferings" (Philo and Wilbert 13) in places specified

for human use. Breaking into human houses and using them for beastly business is a way of

turning the space into their place and making it meaningful. Often, in situations like these,

human dominant groups take measures to suppress such placemaking. During those moments,

we observe how space offers a platform to reaffirm one's power over the other[59].

Proximity to nonhumans destabilizes the human idea of the nature/culture divide. A city

where monkeys run amok is a site where nature is not under control. As a result, a sense of

unease and unrest persists between humans and nonhumans. Old Dhaka human residents adopt

multiple measures to subdue wild nature and, in the process, assert their ownership of space. It

begins with the measures taken by Khoimon to prevent monkeys from entering her bedroom.

The following section illuminates an active suppression of fringe culture.

> After that, she cut up an old sari and made a curtain which she put up at the window; she
>
> said that when she had to go somewhere nearby, she didn't feel like leaving her son
>
> behind and locking the door, that made her unhappy – so she only latched the door before
>
> leaving. But on account of the depredations of the monkeys, perhaps nothing was gained
>
> by putting up a curtain at the window, monkeys were monkeys after all, they removed the

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[59] "Place, at a basic level, is space invested with meaning in the context of power" (Cresswell 12).

curtain; when Khoimon subsequently began shutting the window, the monkeys exceeded themselves, after all they didn't have much sense, (44-45)

This section speaks to the relationship dynamic between human and nonhuman residents. Their interactions and movements create "human-animal spatialities", engendering boundaries between the two as monkeys find a way to circumvent the codified spatial order of their human counterparts[60] (Bull 6). Monkeys continue to trespass, and humans keep on imposing spatial boundaries to demarcate their places from those of animals. In the passage above, Khoimon hangs a curtain made of an old sari at her window as a symbolic gesture to ward off unwanted creatures. Her action declares the space out of bounds to nonhumans. She "[latches] the door before leaving" her house (44) and puts a padlock on it (155). But the monkeys deny her dominance over her living space by removing the curtain and unlatching the door to make their way into the room. A continuous struggle for spatial expression manifests in the passage. Fear and aversion ensue from nonhuman presence close to human habitation as evident in Khoimon's annoyance, such as "after all monkeys were only monkeys" and "after all they didn't have much sense". Next, when she spots several monkeys on a wall near her house, she misses a beat and wonders "what's this, what are so many monkeys doing here[?]" (11). Her assertions hint at a shared feeling of insecurity about nonhumans within the community. This sense of unease renders their mohalla an unsafe and unruly space where nature runs wild. For monkeys, the mohalla is a site of constant struggle for a habitat.

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[60] "Human-animal spatialities", put Bull and Holmberg, can be conceptualised as a series of *movements*. Whereas a focus on structures approaches the way that the dynamic between social and material shapes the spatial fabric of everyday life, attention to movements zooms in on the ways in which paths, routes and connections are made and codified, and how boundaries emerge around them while defining spaces (6).

In any case, nonhuman acts of entering and using the human private domain for beastly undertakings change the meaning of the space concerned. To wit, "animals are active place-making agents" who produce "materialised meanings around certain places", such as wilderness, farm, home, laboratory, etc. (Bull and Holmberg 2). As such, invaded by monkeys, Khoimon's bedroom becomes a dangerous, unhomely terrain for Khoimon who holds that "a monkey was a violent creature, a wild animal, what if it jumped and bit the baby [Chan Miya]" (12). Similarly, Mrs. Zobeida Rahman's roof terrace transforms into an unruly, unsafe zone when monkeys appropriate it to serve their beastly purposes. Activities on the roof terrace concomitantly make it a human-nonhuman contact zone and monkey territory.

> Then one day Golam Rahman went up the stairs to the terrace and found it was full of
> shit, … [He] went again to the Narinda or Sutrapur police station, and after hearing
> everything, the officer-in-charge said, *'Bandorerto paykhana kora lagbe, tai na?* After all
> monkeys need to shit, don't they?' What more could Golam Rahman say then? If
> monkeys got the urge to shit, ought they to come only to their terrace and do their
> business, and create a mountain of shit there! Wasn't there a solution to all this?... but the
> officer-in-charge smiled, he said, 'Monkeys are part of the heritage of old Dhaka'. (545)

Defecation is suggestive of territory marking. It is generally a nonhuman way of laying claim to a space. But this act further changes the meaning of the roof terrace from a semi-public homely space where household and leisure activities take place to risky, uncivilized, and unruly[61]. Conversely, the given excerpt shares different perceptions about these nonhuman actors who are engaged in meaning-making. These perceptions further crystallize nonhumans' position

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[61] The situation is akin to what transpired in Sweden in 2016. Bull and Holmberg notes that after flooding that year, rats emerged from sewers and poured into streets in search of food. Their presence changed the perception of places turning the street and playground park from safe to risky, from civilised to unruly" (1).

as excluded and marginalized. For Golam Rahman, Zobeida Rahman's husband, monkeys are a

social problem that ought to be brought under the purview of the law. As feral animals, they are

out of place and so they induce social distress and danger[62]. The officer's view, however,

resonates with the dominant media representation of old Dhaka as a heritage site. His comment,

"monkeys are part of the heritage of old Dhaka", turns monkeys from being sentient beings to

being symbols of tradition and culture, more precisely cultural artifacts[63]. Using words, such as

"heritage", in reference to monkeys make them residual elements from the old ways of life.

Monkeys become constituents. They are not whole, not beings. This attitude gestures toward the

monkeys' exchange value insofar as their 'monkey-ness' attracts tourists. "Cultural attributes"

adds to their "natural properties" (Cosgrove 123) and their monkey-ness earns exchange value

and becomes interchangeable and old Dhaka, in turn, becomes an economic zone[64].

The officer, however, later adds another comment that complicates his stance on the

nonhuman dwellers. When he opines that "these are wild monkeys, they have no owner, they are

unclaimed, it's very difficult to bring the matter under the purview of public nuisance in

accordance with the penal code, tell them to keep a lathi in hand instead" (148), he pictures them

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[62] Holmberg in her argument about feral animals shows that this category of animals is not regarded as "native to the street, so they accommodate an out-of-place-ness" (37). They "stand for wider aspects of social anxiety and danger", posits Adrian Franklin (qtd. in Holmberg 37; Wolch 730). Monkeys likewise are viewed a "social problem "(Holmberg 37).

[63] Jennifer Wolch applies the term "cultural artifacts" to explain how domestic animals are treated by traditional cultural geographers (723).

[64] Analogous to this is the case of the salmon in Seattle. During the Clinton Administration, when the city was declared a "critical habitat" for the fish, human residents gave an effort in bringing back streams and restoring spawning areas and tried to "make the city—even if only their small share—safe for salmon" (729). In addition, the political leaders averred that "economic growth and saving the salmon were not incompatible", for the fish attracts tourists and brings in money (Wolch 729). The example shows how salmon's influence on the city's economic growth and culture makes it central to Seattle's identity. Monkeys likewise define the character of old Dhaka neighborhoods as antiquated. The animals as heritage objects increase tourist appeal and inspire a range of emotions from reverence to revulsion in their human neighbors. The policeman in *Face* echoes the politicians in Seattle.

as nonhuman folk devils[65]. Previously, he jested that "after all monkeys need to shit, don't they?"

and despite its light tone, it indeed pointed to the monkeys' rightful share in the space of old

Dhaka alongside their human neighbors. These contradictory opinions indicate how human-

nonhuman relations in the mohalla are grounded in a "dialectic of desire and disgust[66]" (Griffiths

et al. 60). On the one hand, the policeman advises Golam Rahman to take cruel measures, such

as treating monkeys with "a lathi" or a stick to restore the moral order of the city, a common

reaction to folk devils. On the other hand, monkeys are desirable because they are central to old

Dhaka's image as a historical tourist spot. Among the two notions, Mrs. Zobeida Rahman

harbors the former which prompts her to use a gun to remove the monkeys from her terrace

(540). Her exasperation, "there is nothing one can do against monkeys in this country, there was

no way of catching them" (148), speaks of human revulsion for 'wild animals' as it also

bespeaks a sense of abjection that drives this urge for purification[67]. Her desire for cleansing the

area by removing these social deviants brings home another fact about how these beastly

activities destabilize the human notion of modernity[68]. In other words, the out-of-placeness of the

monkeys disturbs the image of the urban and instigates a sense of duty in the humans to restore

order and human control. Later in the novel, she seeks Rabbit Mamun's help in ridding herself of

the monkeys, initiating a direct confrontation between humans and monkeys. Rabbit Mamun

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[65] My invocation of the term is indebted to Goode and Ben-Yehuda's explanation of "moral panic" and "folk devils" (2).

[66] Although Griffiths et al. employ the expression "dialectic of desire and disgust" in relation to pet animals, the same can be deployed to understand the treatment of feral monkeys in old Dhaka. I elaborate on this by discussing the contradictions in the policeman's speech.

[67] Griffiths et al. posit that a sense of abjection drives this urge for purification. As can be seen, nonhumans that cross the human-imposed boundaries cause "abjection, engendering feelings of discomfort or even nausea" (Griffiths et al. 63). However, Julia Kristeva asserts that eliminating the abject is impossible and so any act of "removal" or "purification" is "temporary or partial" (qtd. in Griffiths et al. 71).

[68] In an investigation of the "out-of-place-ness" of chickens in the urban realm, Alice Hovorka posits that livestock transgresses an "urban imaginary" and disturbs the "human notions of modernity" ("Transspecies" 103).

called a carpenter and got three or four 3' x 3' wooden traps made in the courtyard

behind Mamun's house, and after that he and Mrs Zobeida Rahman's two sons took the

traps to the roof and laid them there, jars of Horlicks were placed inside, but the roguish

monkeys didn't touch them! Rabbit then spread a bait of some laddus mixed with poison

on the roof, two or four rats ate the poisoned laddus and died, perhaps one or two crows

as well, but the monkeys stayed out of Rabbit's reach, … [in the evening] when Rabbit

went up to the roof to survey the situation, the monkeys threw a half-piece of brick from

the roof of the stairwell of the adjacent building at his forehead; the brick came flying,

and before he could realize anything, it hit his head, *dhop*, and Rabbit fell in slow motion

on the bed of monkey shit and passed out. (212-13)

This section illustrates a shift in the symbolic meanings of the terrace, laying it out as a

contact zone[69] for human-nonhuman encounters. Rabbit Mamun and Zobeida Rahman's violent

measures to sanitize the terrace lead to a face-off with nonhumans. Against the attack of the

humans, the monkeys retaliate by throwing a "brick" at Mamun. Their reprisal again implies a

struggle for spatial ownership. Both defecation and retaliation are emblematic of inserting

beastly practices into the semi-public household arena, for it is true indeed that in the process of

spatialization, nonhuman involvements are "simultaneously symbolic, social and material"

(Holmberg 37). Socially, nonhuman actions turn themselves into outcasts, while humans who are

consonant with their nonhuman neighbors also become social deviants in the mohalla

community. Myths develop surrounding those humans, providing crucial insights about a society

formed by complex social relationships, and, even in that metaphorical space, nonhumans keep

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[69] In the context of literature, contact zones are "sites on the text's dynamic surface, where violent, tender, and potentially subversive encounters between human and animal are concentrated", explains Lönngren (242).

transgressing the human-set cultural and material boundaries. Suckling a human baby, playing

with it (233), and kidnapping it another time (48) bypass human-set conventions and norms. In

both material and metaphorical realms, their socio-spatial operations disturb the existing social

order and agreed-upon roles. When the animals are welcomed into the house, the normative

human-animal boundaries collapse.

Urban lore involving such human-nonhuman relations presents the mohalla as an

exclusionary place for humans who closely interact with nonhumans. Associations with

nonhumans result in social exclusion and otherization as shown in the cases of Khoimon and her

son. Hearsay about Chan Miya's childhood inspires a moral panic that brings his identity into

question. Like Greek philosopher Diogenes who putatively turned "doglike" in terms of smell,

behavior, and cognition after raising dogs all his life (Holmberg 46), Chan Miya is rumored to

have become monkey-like after being suckled by a monkey during his infancy. Since the age of

four, people begin to ask him, "you drink monkey's milk, are you a monkey?" (50). At school,

he is known as the "monkey boy" among his peers and teachers (136). Like her son, Khoimon

becomes a social pariah for allegedly getting a band of monkeys to take care of her son while she

is out earning (125). In all this, myths paint the mohalla as an unforgiving place for those who do

not share the same values and lifestyle as others, on one level. On another level, the 'humanimal'

landscape allows for the growth of a lasting, symbiotic relationship. Monkeys take away

Khoimon's food items and in return, they bring a grapefruit (126), a bottle of Horlicks, and even

a book (127)! Rumors say that they also put baby Chan Miya to sleep and watch over him (43).

Eventually, Chan Miya grows up to have a lifelong bond with his nonhuman companions, and

when he becomes a professional car thief in youth, he is always seen with his "monkey brigade"

whenever he visits the mohalla (211). Common among the gossip and rumors is the tendency to

construe this unique human-monkey bond in an anthropomorphic light. When a baby monkey

hisses at Zobeida Rahman and she falls with her pots and plates at the well-side, she concludes

that the monkey is surely Chan Miya's first playmate who has taken revenge on her because her

family ganged up on Chan Miya the "fatherless boy" several days back (147). Or when monkeys

bring a book and a bottle of Horlicks for Chan Miya, Khoimon and Nurani Bilkis surmise that it

must be a father-monkey who "realized that human babies need to read and write" (127).

Viewing this exchange as an act of returning the favor for sharing food with the monkeys is to

declare the locations as sites of transaction and the relationship transactional. Such a notion

attributes human-like intentionality to the animals. What the two parties intend to do is, in fact,

ambiguous in the narrative. It is unknown why Khoimon's family and the monkeys share a

special bond. But it is clear that their relationship develops in a spontaneous manner made

possible by the organic structure of the mohalla. Khoimon, like her neighbors, views the

nonhumans as pests. But when she goes out, she keeps her front door latched but not locked

making it easier for the monkeys to enter. Zahir responds to the question of intentionality in the

following lines:

> The monkeys of Ghost Lane persisted in keeping watch over Chan Miya, perhaps the
>
> sensitivity of these monkeys of Dhaka city came to equal that of humans, perhaps not
>
> entirely equal to that of humans – because perhaps the idea of human sensitivity itself is a
>
> myth. (125)

Whether or not these are conscious human and nonhuman actions is difficult to ascertain.

Seeing them as purposeful deeds also runs the risk of being anthropocentric. The quote's

emphasis on "sensitivity" as a myth suggests that humans are at the same time similar to and

different from nonhumans. Such a re-presentation of nonhuman activities moves away from

presenting nonhumans as only metaphors for human experience. Rather, it makes them visible in the old Dhaka landscape as excluded groups with a set of distinct meaning-making systems. Zahir's *Face* and the accompanying myths lay out how monkeys negotiate their space within the private and semi-public domains in the city and leave imprints on places, creating a "den" (49) or their 'beastly places'. In short, nonhuman presence in metaphorical and material realms brings to light their engagement in the production and reproduction of animal geographies not just in the domestic sphere but also in the public and semi-public spaces of old Dhaka and beyond.

Reading avian landscape

> Looking up then, Akalu saw the raven sitting on a branch of the palm tree, with its head drooping down, and then Akalu and Tepi observed, to their astonishment and horror, that the number of crows spending the night on the branches of the palm tree kept increasing by the day. Very soon, there was not enough space for the crows on the palm tree and on the roof of their hut. Then, Akalu and Tepi finally accepted the inevitable; with the money the two of them earned from work, Akalu purchased long lengths of borak bamboo and laid beams and cross beams overhead, spanning their entire compound, with fifty-one rows and thirteen columns, thus forming six hundred and sixty-three frames. ("Woodcutter" 125)

The irrealist premise of "Woodcutter" charts cases of nonhuman spatial transgressions of the urban public and semi-public domains. Despite its fantastical elements[70], there is a degree of truth in Zahir's representation insofar as the ubiquity of crows and ravens in the city of Dhaka is

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[70] Human urban occupants take inspiration from objects already existing in space to "symbolize lived experience and to produce meaning" (McCann 172). The selected section from "Woodcutter" offers a human representation of city life co-produced by humans and nonhumans.

concerned. Alongside humans, the birds have adapted to urban lifestyle and their trajectories, paths, and practices provide layers of meanings to their symbolic landscape.

The given excerpt follows the story of a couple whose life takes dramatic, arguably catastrophic, turns every time they chance upon crows and/or ravens. From their village in Sirajganj to the Dayaganj slum; to the jailhouse in old Dhaka; and to Noyatola, and Mogbazar in new Dhaka, crows are everywhere. Notwithstanding their desperate attempts, the couple cannot avoid their chance encounters with crows. First when they spot two ravens outside their hut in Boikunthopur (104), Akalu the woodcutter finds a bag of hundred-taka notes amounting to one lac taka in a hollow of a tree (107). But their happiness does not last when he seeks a lawyer's advice with the help of a cigarette seller in the town of Sirajganj. The lawyer takes five bundles away from him as his fee, the cigarette seller takes three, and at night robbers break into their hut and snatch away the rest (111). Next, they run into a raven on an empty field near the Dayaganj slum in old Dhaka after fleeing their village following the robbery. Shortly after the encounter, policemen at Narinda police outpost beats up Akalu (117). Afterward, the couple falls victim to a conspiracy and lands in jail to serve a year and a half's imprisonment (122). In prison, Akalu yet again fails to escape the "black-coloured bird… sitting on the twigs" (122). As such, nonhuman urban transgressors move everywhere, bypassing human spatial regulations. Nonhuman operations in the human domain of imagination[71] reveal a great deal about human-nonhuman relations and space-based conflicts. In what follows I purpose to examine the ways in which crows and ravens engage in the "semiotic processes of meaning-making" (Michael 282) turning

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[71] Another expression for the "domain of imagination" is Lefebvre's notion of representational space. Representational space, details McCann, is the imaginary realm of the "artists, photographers, filmmakers, and poets" who "construct counter-discourses" using symbolism (172). "It is space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'"; of artists, writers, and philosophers (Production 39).

several public and semi-public domains into human-nonhuman habitation, and sites for a non-

anthropomorphic transaction and economic opportunity.

The shared passage sketches out a human-nonhuman struggle over scarce space in the

city. Released from prison, Akalu and Tepi begin to live in Noyatola as caretakers of the jailer's

property when they experience yet another invasion of the birds. This time, countless crows and

ravens infiltrate their rooftop and the palm tree in the compound. The couple realizes that they

cannot escape their fate that puts them at the mercy of the whims of crows and/or ravens and so

they build a "bamboo platform" for the birds to nest instead. Their acceptance of the "inevitable"

point to the fact that the urban area is not only an exclusionary habitat for a singular dominant

species but also a center for interspecies intermingling. The birds thus create their own colony

within a human residence, transcending conceived[72] boundaries of codified space. In other

words, they reassert themselves in a place designated only for humans. As this makes the spot a

place for interspecies coexistence, it further marks it as disorderly and untamable that Akalu and

his wife Tepi attempt to subdue by setting up "bamboo frames"[73]. The couple's reaction to the

prospect of cohabitation is a way of suppressing avian landscape expressions by means of

'taming nature'[74]. However, the birds continue to carve out their own animal space by filling out

their compound with "heaps of crow dung" (129). They navigate in and out of the courtyard as

they did in the cases of the railroad and the prison of their own volition. Therefore, the word

"inevitable" further proves that fully taming nature is unfeasible, and that nature is not "fixed at a

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[72] My use of the term "conceived" invoked Lefebvre's theory of the representations of space aptly expounded in *The Production of Space*.

[73] The abundance of the birds generates what Jerolmack explains in his study on pigeons as "anxiety about disorder" that calls for "a sanitized city" (73). As a result, humans are selective in allowing certain nonhuman animals into the urban landscape, but they do so through a process of "[civilizing] and [subduing] 'nature'" by means of "spaying/neutering, grooming, and declawing 'pets'" for instance (Jerolmack 74)

distance but emerges within the routine interweavings of people, organisms, elements and machines as these configure in the partial, plural and sometimes overlapping time/spaces of everyday living" (qtd. in "Transspecies" 97). This inevitability presents the city as an antithesis of the ideal metropolis that is well kept and sanitized and in which nature is under control. Thus, phrases such as "astonishment and horror" signify human feelings of unease and disgust deriving from an unrestrained presence of crows and ravens in a cityscape where the human notion of nature/culture boundary has crumbled. Unlike monkeys that live in clusters in old Dhaka and in some areas in the new Dhaka, namely Lalmatia, Tejgaon old airport, and the Dhaka cantonment area (Sultana 176), crows and ravens are dispersed throughout the city. "Astonishment and horror" are reactions to their hyperbolic abundance in "the wrong places at the wrong times" typifying themselves as "nuisance wildlife" (Herda-Rapp and Goedeke 2). Akalu's aversion to crows and/or ravens, on the one hand, rests in their uncanny abundance[75] as can be seen in the excerpt. His wife and his attitude to the birds invest the latter with godlike qualities that allow the birds to be present anywhere and everywhere. For Akalu and Tepi, the birds are bad omens. They stand in for a fear of the uncanny. Invisible in the text, on the other hand, is another reason for the couple's "astonishment and horror"—the birds' scavenging habit. Crows as scavengers feed off our waste and thus establish their "inferiority" and "low status" in the hierarchy of animals (Holmberg 45). While the profusion of the crows and ravens presents them as pests, their scavenging habit makes them unpleasant and unattractive[76] most of the time and desirable

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[75] In a study on pigeons, Colin Jerolmack notes that the pigeon, a "controversial urban animal", "is one of the most despised urban transgressors because they—in all their animality—are so public" (qtd. in Holmberg 45; Jerolmack 86). The same applies to crows and ravens, for they live, reproduce, and defecate "on sidewalks, streets, and ledges" (Jerolmack 86). While the cities become more urbanized and the animals start to disappear from the cityscape, crows and ravens in Dhaka, like pigeons in the Western cities, turn out to be one of the most visible urban animals.

[76] Jerolmack contends that nonhumans are often seen as pests when they are considered "useless" (75), but they become particularly "unremarkable and aesthetically unattractive" (Čapek 201) when viewed as scavengers (Jerolmack 75).

at other times. Here I recall the dialectic of desire and disgust I used to explain human-monkey relations in old Dhaka. An example is when a mass migration occurs, the mohalla folk remembers the absence of the birds with an air of regret.

> After this incident, the city of Dhaka became devoid of crows, and Dhaka's elderly folk can now remember that, in those days, incidents of cakes of soap vanishing from beside the tap stopped completely; but at the same time, mounds of un-scavenged garbage kept piling up on the streets, and the sky over the city became monotonously void of birds. ("Woodcutter" 131)

This description gestures toward nonhuman scavenging activities in two senses. First, it points to the hoarding habit of the crows by means of stealing. Second, it indicates the ecological service they offer in and around the city by managing urban waste. After Akalu and Tepi begins to share their courtyard with the birds, they discover the bird's hoarding habit that transforms their status from that of a pest to that of a utility. This in turn provides another layer of meaning to Akalu's courtyard. Its meaning changes from a place of human-nonhuman habitation into a place of transaction.

> …when the crow chicks that had been born here began to fly, and Akalu dismantled the crows' nests and sold eighteen-and-a-half maunds of scrap, comprising cycle spokes, metal wire, pieces of steel and so on, the people of the moholla became aware of the matter. They were amazed at the business acumen of the rustic man and his wife, and this sense of astonishment on their part turned into a kind of desire and envy when they came to know that, one day, Tepi had invited Nimphol Dasi, the woman who swept the streets of the locality, to her house and fed her fried crows' eggs, and that when she was leaving,

Tepi took out from the hollow of a bamboo post in the shanty a pair of gold earrings

retrieved from a crow's nest and gave it to her. (126)

A transaction of a non-anthropomorphic nature takes place between Akalu and the birds

after the couple discovers "eighteen-and-a-half maunds of scrap" in their nests. As can be seen,

after humans allow nonhumans to set up a colony within their territory, nonhumans provide them

with scavenged items that profit their human neighbors. They feed on the crows' eggs and

entertain their guest Nimphol Dasi with them. It is when the neighbors' "desire and envy" for

Akalu and Tepi's "business acumen" reinforce the courtyard's new-found meaning as a space for

economic opportunity.

Many people of the Noyatola–Mogbazar locality then gave up keeping pigeons and

vacated their pigeon coops and the high bamboo platforms in their compounds in favour

of black crows. But even after trying continuously for six months, their efforts towards

raising crows remained futile, so then one evening, they assembled in front of the gate in

the wall of the compound where Akalu lived and called him out, and they told him, You

gave gold earrings to the sweeper, you have to give the same to us too. (126)

For Akalu and Tepi, their yard becomes a site that encourages the growth of a symbiotic

relationship. For their neighbors, it offers an economic prospect. This illustrates a transition in

human perceptions of crows. Their status elevates from that of pests and nuisance to that of a

source of income. Replicating the couple, their neighbors raise "high bamboo platforms in their

compounds", thus turning their semi-public spaces into economic zones. Here again, we notice

the nonhuman influence and investment in placemaking. Like the roof terrace in *Face*, Akalu's

courtyard becomes a textured place with multiple meanings. The given extract prefigures another

change in its meaning after the neighbors start to regularly assemble in front of Akalu and Tepi's entrance when their "efforts towards raising crows" prove "futile".

In the face of adversity, the birds defend their colony turning the courtyard into a war zone like the roof terrace in *Face*. Their efforts in safeguarding their abode are a way of claiming the space as their own. This symbolic transformation happens when the neighbors become increasingly hostile to Akalu and Tepi out of jealousy. After failing to generate any profit from their investment in raising crows and ravens, they first begin to ask for valuable gifts from Akalu and Tepi (126). Then, for "thirteen days at a stretch, they [fling] jackfruit rinds on Akalu" on his way back home from work, and then resort to throwing "putrid cow dung" at him for the next five days (127). Then, they "set dogs upon Tepi" (127). Afterward, when they find no trace of the couple on the streets, they try to climb over the wall to enter their compound. That's when sensing an ensuing threat to their habitat, the birds attack and injure the trespassers. Human-nonhuman encounters at the public and private interfaces again exemplify how the two parties are responsible for granting a gamut of meanings to places. Their interactions immediately turn a place from a safe homely space into a hostile contact zone.

> Three people then tried to force the gate open from outside, but when they were unable to open it and tried to climb over the wall, then, from among the hitherto silently gazing crows, seven ordinary crows and three ravens, ten birds in all, casually left their bamboo frames and flew towards them. The people of the moholla were already furious at not getting any of the jewellery brought by the crows, and now, after being pecked at by the crows, their rage knew no bounds. When the three people who had climbed over the wall lay injured following the crows' attack, the others moved back and then surrounded the walls of the compound where Akalu lived. (128)

As is shown, the birds not only reinsert themselves into a human habitat but also hold out against any attack on their settlement. They "peck" at their attackers, injuring three people and in the end, the neighbors set the compound on fire. As a result, the birds migrate elsewhere, and the cityscape of Dhaka becomes "devoid of crows" (131). All their actions turn the place of action into a meaningful location for nonhumans as well as humans. In the end, the analyses of *Face* and "Woodcutter" attest to nonhuman participation in restructuring the symbolic meanings of cultural landscapes. Their knowable communities provide us with a way to understand a place in all its shades, meanings, and associations made by diverse social groups.

Conclusion

Shahidul Zahir's stylistic innovations in changing sociopolitical landscapes

At this point, we can assert that the place of old Dhaka carries an amalgam of diverse cultural

expressions and that its meanings are historically variable. The selected works of Shahidul Zahir

create scope for investigating those changes in spatial meanings. They further redirect our

attention to their unique form and content, suggesting how different historical moments and

shifts in the social order informed and determined Zahir's aesthetic forms. Each of these stories

registers different and differing experiences of modernity. Crises and contradictions of global

capitalist modernity and other aspects of contemporary social reality characterize their formal

features.

The four texts that we have examined are formally experimental and stylistically distinct.

Face and *Life* combine residual folkloric forms and elements of realism. "History" is narrated in

a single paragraph with chronological disjunction and no period. It ends with a comma to

indicate a continuation of industrialization. Its title "The History of Our Cottage Industry" brings

to mind a non-literary historical report, but its content speaks a great deal about buying and

selling watermelons. "Woodcutter" mixes its irrealist content with a traditional realist narrative

structure. Common among the stories are hybridity and disjuncture between form and content. I

suggest that their unique narrative styles reflect their respective time and social conditions. To

put it differently, their disjuncture is emblematic of the uneven development of global capitalist modernity[77].

A decade after the partition of India in 1947, "History" traces a nationwide zeal for industrialization in the 1960s presented on the scale of an old Dhaka mohalla. In a local collective voice indicated with the use of "we", the story unfolds in a non-linear, fragmented structure. Consider the opening that introduces contradictions through spatial and material unevenness.

> We recall the industrialization of our moholla, South Moishundi; when the days began to get hot, it was Chaitra, and in Baisakh or Jaishta, the watermelon vendors arrived with their watermelons and we began eating them, and thus we became conscious of watermelons; we would notice that these vendors were inclined to set up their makeshift shops beside a wall in a narrow part of the street of the moholla and lay out the round watermelons in small heaps on the ground, but we couldn't figure out why they sat there, and so rickshaws, push- and bullock-carts, babytaxis, dogs, goats and humans created a snarl when they arrived there we would hear the sound of the lathe machines; we then remembered the history of our moholla and learnt in detail about watermelons. (27-28)

Using an incoherent narrative style that jumps from one topic to another without elaborating much on the previous one, the passage lays out the landscape juxtaposing residual modes of transportation, such as animal-drawn carriages, with modern transportation. Later in the narrative, information about the history of industrialization appears in between gossip about

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[77] Here I borrow the interpretive framework of the theory of combined and uneven development. The theory is formulated to understand the moment in which capitalist forms and relations co-exist with archaic social formations and how this unevenness manifest in literature (WReC 11-16).

neighbors, recollections of a shared past, and detailed analyses of watermelon vending. At a giddying speed, factories with modern technologies crop up all over the mohalla. Contrarily, watermelon production continues under landowning elites in rural areas[78] (45). Refrigerators, grinders, and blenders appear in the urban market, but open defecation persists in village areas— a contradiction that defies the normative understanding of modernity. Theatres project English films that the men in the mohalla watch but do not understand (41). Then the story records how globalization comes with both advantages and disadvantages. Mohalla folk now can enjoy red Japanese watermelons, but they are concomitantly worried about adulteration. Crises, contradictions, and conditions of uneven development thus come to life in "History". This unevenness inscribes itself in the form of the story.

From its title to its repetitive utterances, "we recall the industrialization of our moholla", "we realized", "we remembered", etc., "History" echoes the pattern of a non-literary report. In between the immediacy and intimacy of gossip and community life, the narrative progression is punctured by reports on the number of lathe machines installed in the mohalla or the number of products we-narrators have produced as factory workers.

> after producing one and a half maunds of nuts and bolts, ten maunds of bread-biscuits-
> lozenges and seven gross of drinking glasses in the moholla each day, we found out in the
> late afternoon or evening one day, that watermelons could be adulterated, (38-39)

The extract's emphasis on quantitative data stays, in fact, true to its title's initial agenda of documenting the history of the mohalla's industrialization. Then it immediately shifts our

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[78] A rumor spread by Alamgir Hossain's wife indicates this. Hossain attended a meeting organized by the factory owners' association in Bogura. There he saw "a man, probably a peasant, squatting with his back to the road and his backside uncovered, […] defecating in the watermelon field" (45).

attention to the minute details of local ordinary activities such as buying and selling watermelons.

Further, its lack of coherence in the storytelling sheds light on focalization. The storytellers are people from within the community who recall their shared experiences in the past as they witness the developments in the present. Their listeners are also from the same community as indicated in the use of "we" and "our" in the opening sentence: "we recall the industrialization of our moholla" (27). They later reminisce about their fathers in a manner that bespeaks a shared generational history:

> Because we were confronted with the dilemma of choosing between two kinds of watermelons, something our fathers weren't (28-29)

Indeed, non-linear progression characterizes modernism, but an incoherent narration offers the closest depiction of reality because our physical world does not "present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories" (Carr 118). It does not follow a formal sequence of beginnings and endings in the way stories are formed. Our world is random, haphazard, and discontinuous (Carr 121). In that sense, this fragmented narrative provides a realistic re-presentation of the casual speech of informal collective speakers. At this juncture, a reader must go through the short story keeping "one eye to its realism" (WReC 67) and the other to its modernism[79].

As the story progresses without any period but with the aid of commas and semicolons in the original, the we-narrator's past bleeds into their present. Such use of punctuation opposes

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[79] According to the Warwick Research Collective, "to read modernist literature in the light of combined and uneven development is then to read it with one eye to its realism" (67).

realist conventions. Temporal discontinuity also figures in the narrative with differing sets of

temporal notions among the locals. Here the normative fast-paced, future-oriented time of global

capitalist modernity is challenged by the slow-and leisurely movements of the characters. Caitlin

Vandertop argues that in the global peripheries,

> the interruption of the linear progression to maturity occurs not only through aesthetic
>
> and avant-garde challenges to developmental time but also through the stalled movement
>
> of urban protagonists, who—if not trapped in bedrooms or basements—wander the
>
> streets aimlessly or find their journeys hindered by the task of transporting others. (370)

"History" likewise poses such a "challenge to developmental time" through the "stalled

movement[s]" of local watermelon buyers. Amid the rapid growth of small-scale industries in the

mohalla, their relaxed movements stand as a sharp contrast.

> then amidst the silence we would hear the sound of the lathe machines; we then
>
> remembered the history of our moholla and learnt in detail about watermelons; we would
>
> take a watermelon in the cup of our hands and try to guess how much it weighed, and
>
> looking vacantly towards the sky, try to master the skill of figuring out the correlation
>
> between the weight of a watermelon and the quality of its inner substance; we would
>
> place our palm very delicately on its shiny skin, which resembled a bald head, and try to
>
> intuit whether the fruit was fresh and its juiciness was intact; we would ask the
>
> watermelon vendor, 'Are flies born during the time of watermelons, or is it that
>
> watermelons fruit during the time of flies? ("History" 28)

The manners in which the customers try to determine the quality of the watermelons by

putting the fruit in the cup of their hands and looking vacantly at the sky is suggestive of fiddling

away their time. This puts their local sense of time at odds with the global sense of time. For

factory owner Haji Abdur Rashid, time is always speedy and future-oriented[80]. Even when he

falls ill after swallowing watermelon seeds, he makes plans about installing a lathe machine in

the mohalla lying on the bed (30). This happens when the we-narrator is an adolescent. By the

time they reach adulthood, numerous factories and workshops, modern technology, and

transportation transform the mohalla's infrastructure. Lorries replace bullock carts to transport

construction materials (45). Amid rapidly changing circumstances in a space of economic

opportunity and competition, leisurely movements of the walkers and bystanders indicate

temporal disjunction.

In the content of this short story, urban capitalist modernization and development

coincide with rural backwardness in the form of unhygienic practices. With industrial

transformation sweeping across old Dhaka mohallas, peasant labor continues under landowning

elites in village areas. Formally, the story yokes attributes of a non-literary historical report to

modernist storytelling[81]. Its modernist narration through temporal and narrative disjuncture is

symptomatic of a changing social order. But it also veers from the characteristic subjectivist

modernist narration to a collective one.

Life, on the other hand, presents an interplay between subjectivity and collectivity

through restless focalization in a meandering, non-linear narrative. The novella opens in another

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[80] Paul Smethurst explains that for modernism time is "predominately, although not exclusively, future-oriented, and space is predominately abstract, homogeneous and expansive" (2).

[81] Bangla words such as "*bishod/bistarito*" or elaborate/detailed in the sentence "*Amader tokhon mohalla-er itihash mone pore, amra tormuj shomporke bishod/bistarito jante pari*" [we then remembered the history of our moholla and learnt in detail about watermelons] (*Shahidul* 279) and the use of "we" are commonly used in formal reports. They aptly correspond to the story's title "The History of Our Cottage Industry". This "we" conversely serves to fuse together a quasi-objective report and an intimate collective experience as suggested in the juxtaposition of formal diction and local dialect, "*amra tader boli, tumra ei machhir dine tormuj loya aho kyala*" [we berated them, 'Why do you bring watermelons in this time of flies!'] (*Shahidul* 279).

old Dhaka mohalla on the cusp of a change in political power. Cast in the shadows of the 1971 war, *Life* registers the ravaged landscape of old Dhaka and the crises of modernity in post-war Bangladesh in 1985 through its fragmented form, shifting gazes, repetition, alternative collective memory, and persistent individual anxiety. Its formal and conceptual experimentation resolves the shocking and unfair postwar political developments by inserting fantastical elements in a realist premise of the actual liberation war.

Set in a turbulent present, this landscape has a past of political, economic, and socio-cultural exploitation under intra-state imperialism[82]. Even after independence, political oppression continues as war criminals remain in power. Contradictions in *Life* figure in the twisted political speech of these war criminals.

On the day following that day after the strike, when all the parties had addressed the people as 'Brothers' and thanked them and the strap on Abdul Mojid's sandal went *phot* and snapped, he encountered Ajij Pathan briefly on the street; in the course of talking about a few things, Abdul Mojid also remarked that Moulana Bodu now addressed them as '*Bhaishob,* Brothers' and thanked them for the strike… He took him to his house after a long time, and said so many things to him, almost none of which Abdul Mojid could understand, all except for one thing, which was that, after all, in politics there was no such thing as friends for life or enemies for life, and so, what else could people do but forget the past? But the people of Lakshmi Bazar who kept on forgetting the past saw that their past broke unremittingly through the soil and sprang up, like shoots of grass. (60)

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[82] K.P. Misra argues that west Pakistan subjected its eastern wing to political, economic, and socio-cultural oppression that was redolent of "the traditional relationship between an imperial power and a colony" (Misra 36).

This section throws up a host of issues about contradictions and irony and twisted political games, among others. When oppositional parties address the mohalla folk as "brothers" in their rallies, people become "puzzled" (27). They find no conformity between their speech and their doings in the recent past. Their reality appears distorted and absurd when the war criminal Moulana Bodu delivers his speech on the very ground in which he unleashed untold violence on the same people he now addresses as "brothers". The memories of the fire in Nayabazar on the twenty-fifth of March haunt their conscience and make them disorientated as they listen to his speech without protest. In an ironic turn of events, Ajij Pathan joins parties with Moulana Bodu who looted and set Pathan's house on fire in 1971. Pathan's remark to Mojid in the excerpt "what else could people do but forget the past" along with Bodu's political campaigns indicate a concerted attempt at creating collective amnesia. Then, old Dhaka further becomes a site of contradictions and irony when the protagonist Abdul Mojid flees his mohalla in independent Bangladesh and Moulana Bodu comes out of his hiding and ascends to power.

Life reconciles with this subversion of conventional causality[83] and twisted and absurd material reality by mixing elements of myth and magic with realism. In the political rally of the collaborator's son, he

> observed that the lacklustre afternoon sky above Nawabpur was clouded by termites, and that there were countless crows gambolling behind the fleeing termites. It occurred to him that because of the screeches of the crows and the soundless striving of the termites to escape, a kind of a sense of silent panic pervaded the melancholy afternoon at Nawabpur Road. (3)

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[83] WReC identifies the "subversions of conventional causality" as a characteristic of modernism (54).

Here, a serious political speech in a realist setting is juxtaposed with the irreal happenings in the sky. This imagery serves as a gateway to other myths about Moulana Bodu. Through oral transmission, mohalla-based alternative historical narratives coexist with nationalist historiography. In the myths, the truths and the horrors of war add a fantastical angle. People of mohalla testify that in 1971 Moulana Bodu fed the crows the flesh of those killed in the war.

> The people of Lakshmi Bazar remembered that in 1971, come evening, Moulana Bodu used to smile tenderly and set crows flying in the moholla's sky. Moulana Bodu and his sons used to go up to his rooftop with a plateful of meat. Those who were still there in the moholla then had said that the meat, whose pieces Moulana Bodu flung skywards every day, was human flesh. Because the head of the oldest Muslim family of the moholla, Khwaja Ahmed Ali, had said that one day when the crows failed to grab a piece of meat that had been thrown, it landed on the roof of his house… Everyone in the moholla learnt about all this later… Another piece of flesh, from the big toe of the foot, had been found by an unknown pedestrian on the pavement beside the road. Abu Korim's elder son had witnessed it, and so people came to know all about it…. No one knew what happened to this severed toe. But one day, Abu Korim's elder son disappeared while returning from a shop in Raysha Bazar. Another piece of flesh had fallen beside the well of Jomir Byapari's house, right into the rice pot, while rice was being washed in the late afternoon. It was a severed penis. (5-6)

Polyvocality comes with a shift in focalization. Narrative gazes continuously shift from that of Abdul Mojid to that of the people of Lakshmi Bazar. Again, its incoherent, cyclical narrative resembles the speech pattern of common folk. Both "History" and *Life* stress a mohalla-centric collective experience, but *Life* does so without a we-narrator. Collectivity

manifest in the novella with the repetitive mention of "everyone remembered", "everyone recalled", "everyone in the moholla learnt about all this later", and the like. It further shows how myth is constituted with everyone's participation and agreement. Thus, Moulana Bodu's myth takes shape by piecing together information from Khwaja Ahmed Ali and then Abu Korim's elder son who witnessed another person spotting a severed toe, and lastly Jomir Byapari.

In a hybrid combination of modernist structure, realist historical premise, and magical elements, *Life* thus presents the realities of a war-torn landscape. Its unconventional paragraphing, chronological disjunction, and anti-linear plot characterize modernism. But the foregoing extract regarding mythmaking in the mohalla is redolent of oral storytelling. And in the content of the novella, realist historical narrative coexists with alternative historical renditions.

Orality reappears in *Face* in the form of rumor and gossip in a broader canvas spanning about four decades from before the time of war in 1971 to the early 2000s. The novel presents the transformation of a war-torn landscape into a global space. In this transnational space well-connected with the rest of the world, people undergo crises of identity and placelessness— a byproduct of global capitalist modernity. *Face* reflects such social conditions in its content and form. Its narrative voice repeatedly shifts from standard Bangla to the old Dhaka dialect blurring the distinction between dialogue and narration. Its language is authentic and true to the people and the place, but its content carries elements of myth and magic. Snippets from the actual war in 1971 merge with a modernist fragmented narrative. Also, the dispersal of myths taps into a residual oral tradition.

Face's hybrid form captures a hybrid space. Decades after the war, it is now a place where foreign investors come to make business deals. Engagements with the globe boom national economy but it also increases the scope for human trafficking. The following extract introduces foreign nationals, owners of BMW cars, and their businesses in Bangladesh in a conversation between Chan Miya and the hotel security guard Habibur Rahman.

> The white [BMW] car belongs to Ghasir Bin Ahram, he has an airline company, he traffics people to the Middle East; the arsehole Pakistani or Indian employees in the airports of Dubai or Dhahran or Jeddah address the trafficked folk of Bangladesh rudely, calling them "tui" – *"Aei, kidhar jata hai tu"*; the Arabian brothers don't speak to them either, but flying them is a very lucrative business; the owner of the black one is Andrew L. Bautop, his shop is called Vocal … the blue one belongs to Gandiv Bahta, … the red car is Anwantry Tunabatne's, he's a loan shark, he lends money and takes it back, and if the government announces privatization of two or four banks, he'll swallow them up…
> (219)

This section illustrates the influence of foreign nationals on the economy of Bangladesh. It further raises issues of exploitation and corruption. The example of Ghasir Bin Ahram presents the irony of globalization that shrinks the distance between countries, creating economic opportunity overseas, and then concomitantly pulling people away from each other owing to racial prejudice. In another case, globalization allows for transnational business as it creates scope for smuggling too. *Face* addresses these modern crises as it touches on another condition of globalization— a feeling of placelessness and identity crisis.

A former colony, Bangladesh is home to various ethnic and racial groups. When diverse communities are brought together by colonial and capitalist modernity, it simultaneously initiates a sense of loss of belonging that is carried through generations. Born in Bangladesh, Mary Joyce Clark's family constantly experiences a feeling of displacement. They live among the locals and work with local people, yet they struggle to fit in. The following exemplifies Mary Joyce's crisis through her failure to understand cultural nuances.

> so perhaps the teacher in Silverdale KG School, Mary Joyce, too called Chan Miya 'Chandu', perhaps she had heard Mamun or Ledu or Abhijit call him 'Chandu' and perhaps she thought, 'Let me show him how fond of him I am by addressing him by his pet name!' But this had just the opposite result; Mrs Mary Joyce Clark was yet to learn a lot of things about this country – for instance, she didn't know that 'Chandu' was uncomplimentary, that it meant something like 'chump' – although she was born in this very country, in Dhaka's Tejkunipara. (107-8)

Even after living in this land for generations, Mary Joyce Clark's family is perpetually displaced. Her inability to detect local slang paints her as the other. This is a space her family cannot relate to and so they are constantly on the lookout for a place to call home. When her son Joseph Eugene finally migrates to England, he again fails to integrate into the English community. Because of the color of his skin, he is called a "Paki" and he is finally stabbed to death at the hand of a "miscreant" (176).

Blending magic and reality, local legends register these issues of identity crises. One central legend shows how Chan Miya, a human child, is raised by monkeys. Another myth tells the tale of a human child, Mamun, raised as an animal. Both undergo an identity crisis. Chan

Miya's story raises the question of what makes us human. Mohalla community otherizes Chan Miya for being raised by monkeys. Chan Miya, on the other hand, has an inclination toward the monkeys but he knows he can never be one. Above anything else, as a boy, he realizes that his human years are different from the monkey years as his childhood monkey friends reach adulthood when he is merely a boy. Rabbit Mamun, conversely, spends his childhood locked in a cage as a rabbit. When he returns to the mohalla from Chittagong in his youth, his alleged family fails to recognize him. In the end, Chan Miya returns to the monkeys and Rabbit Mamun returns to his cage curled up "like a foetus in his mother's womb in preparation for another birth – the cage was his mother" (245).

Face thus expresses this sense of disconnect not just in its content but also through an episodic structural pattern. The unfolding of the myths in a conversational style also brings to mind the oral storytelling style. They connect the local to the national as Rabbit Mamun's legend travels from the mohalla to the south end of the country and returns to the mohalla with added flavors and colors.

Another urban myth informs the irrealist structure of "Woodcutter" whose realist structure contains fantastical contents. "Woodcutter" lays out a contemporary urban society in which superstition coexists with scientific knowledge. In the city, astrology juxtaposes modern treatment. Unsanitary practices in rural areas provide a sharp contrast to urban modernity. A disparity between the urban and the rural point to uneven development.

The story begins in the village of Sirajganj where Akalu and Tepi live a slow-moving life. Akalu works independently as a contractual woodcutter and sometimes he chooses to stay at home instead of going out in search of work. As landless people, they live on the Miyas'

property, landowning elites, in the woods and use the bamboo clump beside their shanty as a lavatory. Their quietude shatters when they migrate to the city in which Akalu now must have a regular job as a rickshaw puller to afford a place in the slum. Later, Tepi also become a part-time domestic help as Akalu works as a day laborer. Escaping from the exploitations in their village, they undergo further experiences of fraud in the city. Wicked astrologers, two-faced friends, and corrupt law enforcement make urban space a dangerous terrain. "Woodcutter" draws out such a society in a mixture of irrealist[84] content and realist form.

Unlike Zahir's other three works that we have examined, "Woodcutter" follows a traditional narrative structure and a linear plot. It begins with elderly residents who remember how Dhaka became "devoid of crows" about five years ago because of a series of events originating in a village in Sirajganj. In the end, the narrative goes back to the elders completing the cycle. It gives insider-outsider perspectives on space through the gaze of Akalu and Tepi who experience everything from within Noyatola–Mogbazar locality but are not accepted into the community. Their position as both insider and outsider determines the narrative voice as univocal. The other three works of Zahir offer insider perspectives of both individuals and society as their protagonists are also part of those communities.

Akalu and Tepi as outsiders come to be associated with another excluded group: crows and ravens. The narrative herein introduces its irrealist elements. It is unclear why crows and ravens bring only them, and not others, expensive items, such as gold earrings and rings, and why their encounter with the birds proves to be an ill omen. There is no motive or symbolism involved with the occurrence. It is an inexplicable absurdity that befalls the central characters.

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[84] Michael Lowy theorized "critical irrealism" as an aesthetic "founded on a logic of the imagination, of the marvellous, of the mystery or the dream". It presents "'an imaginary world, composed of fantastic, supernatural, nightmarish or simply nonexistent forms" (qtd. in WReC 83).

The nonhumans are neither anthropomorphized nor used as metaphors for a human experience like the crows in *Life*. When Tepi offers them water, they do not respond like a human but simply stare (116). In a real urban setting with actual places such as Sutrapur police station, Gulistan, etc., Zahir puts supernatural events with a realist depiction of corruption and fraud. Even if Akalu and Tepi's interactions and negotiations with the crows can be seen as a coincidence, the ending establishes the story as irrealist and absurd. Out of jealousy, when the mohalla folk set Akalu and Tepi's walled compound on fire with the couple inside and finally enter their compound, they find no trace of the couple. Later the boatmen in Rampura claim that they saw a swarm of crows flying past carrying two people in their beaks (131).

As can be seen, Zahir's myths are not restricted to the mohalla. They connect the old city with the rest of the country. In *Face*, Rabbit Mamun's myth travels to Chittagong and comes back to the mohalla. In "Woodcutter", crows and ravens follow the protagonists across the country. In *Life*, protagonist Abdul Mojid and his family move to Badda in new Dhaka, carrying Maulana Bodu's myth with them. Stories of industrialization, otherization, war, and globalization thereby challenge old Dhaka's image as an isolated space or a fossil of a glorious past.

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