

Voices from the Margins: Folklore, Decolonial Memory, and the Politics of Identity in Postcolonial Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This article examines folklore as resistance and cultural memory and identity reclamation in the context of post-colonial Bangladesh. One of the most valuable insights that came out was the idea of oral traditions, rituals, songs, and specifically women embroidering performance art not as heritage or 'traditional' / folkloric, but counter narrative that is, subaltern/marginalized interventions in their resistance strategies against colonial and patriarchal systems. The study grounds narratives on six elaborate case studies: Baul songs, Mymensingh Geetika ballads, the Nabanna harvest ritual, Nakshi Kantha embroidery, rural proverbs, and Jatra folk theatre – in a range of literatures relevant to postcolonial theory, cultural memory studies, and indigenous epistemologies. Using a combined methodology of discourse analysis and cultural semiotics, the research interprets these folklore processes as an ongoing archive of defiance. In each instance, I illustrate how piecemeal voices (especially the voices of women, peasants, and marginal religious sects) have found it increasingly difficult to preserve dissent and recreate subaltern agency based on textual utterances through both oral and symbolic acts while claiming cultural sovereignty. It also situates folklore in the larger ambience produced by theorists like Spivak, Bhabha, Chakrabarty, and Mignolo (with whom some of the contributors argue too), while decolonial knowledge productions and memory politics. These results suggest that Bangladeshi folklore is at once an element of cultural heritage and a vital life force in postcolonial worldmaking. They practice the decolonization of the intellect found in folklore by offering alternative perspectives on knowledge, history, and relationship ethics. This has implications for folklore studies in the national curriculum, with a summary of one region's archiving initiatives followed by suggestions for policy and practice. This article speaks to the increasingly cosmopolitan literature on indigenous resistance and epistemic justice in colonial and postcolonial lands by situating folklore within the frameworks of aesthetic resistance and political dialogue.

Keywords: Folklore and Resistance; Postcolonial Identity; Cultural Memory; Decolonial Narrative; Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

INTRODUCTION

As Said (1978) reasons, Colonialism was not only a geography of expansion but an epistemology and system of displacement which worked to displace native histories, language, and culture. In most colonized societies, for example, colonial ethnographers dismissed folklore as irrational or regressive, while folklore continues to be a vibrant medium of resistance and remembrance. Folklore is defined in this study as an important source of resistance to identity obscuring (18), which additionally includes the revision of traditional history writing.

Based on the premise but expanding upon it, postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon (1961), Homi K. Bhabha (1994), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), to name a few, showcased the traumatic displacements and psychic schisms inherent to colonial subjugation. A postcolonial identity is not, for these intellectuals, an attempted return to a pre-conquest state but less than nothing if not a strained negotiation – in life and in symbolic practice — of what it means to live. The folkloric legends provide a means of articulating this defiance through

their stories, allegorical symbols, and ritualistic actions. A living archive of subaltern voices and cultural accumulations; a historical memory resisting hegemonic knowledge formations.

Bangladesh is an interesting context that could fill in this gap. Through its ballads, songs, proverbs, annual celebration, and lore, you express collective struggle, spiritual resilience, and cultural affirmation. Yet, despite centuries of colonial and postcolonial repression or attempts to sanitize these expressions, the Baul philosophy, Mymensingh ballads—regional mythologies continue to provide a vigorous counter-narrative to such homogenizing national and colonial identities (Jalal 1995; Kabir 2017). These narratives frequently circulate informally over long spans of time, refuse to be forgotten, and perform the politics of memory in the lifeworld.

This paper explores the relationship between folklore as a cultural ruin and postcolonial praxis. It asks how folklore can work as a counternarrative in postcolonial spaces and works to recover memory and identity sought to be obliterated by Colonialism. The paper will review folklore from Bangladesh and its postcolonial counterparts, and propose a case for folklore as the fulcrum of intellectual decolonization. It is here that the margins reclaim voice, presence, and deposed power.

Qualitative analyses of ‘the folk imagination’ and ‘postcolonial narrative theory’ will be used in order to deploy their oppositional imaginations as native counter imaginaries that can undermine colonial epistemologies while rearticulating indigenous epistemes. The paper thereby frees itself for an interdisciplinary conversation with folkloristics *sensu stricto* in domains including cultural memory and postcolonial resistance: folklore here is not a fossil from the past, not the urban scuffed-up but not worn-out, but rather a malleable tool of survival, identity-making, and historical reparations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Folklore, it has been rightly stated, is an act of resistance but also an attempt to reclaim. Yet those earlier works have not heavily focused on this nexus of postcolonial theory, cultural memory, and indigenous epistemologies. Folklore was, until then, viewed as a collection of folklore narratives about oral traditions and myth (Dundes, 1980). Rather, folklore has just recently been inflected as a confrontation of culture embedded with power dynamics and resistance (Bendix, 1997; Noyes, 2003). Perhaps not incidentally, folklore is less an atavistic throwback than a living response to social and historical ruptures like these.

In postcolonial societies, folklore has always acted as an enemy strategy to mitigate colonial ideas and the deletion of history being forced upon the people. Chatterjee (1993) and Dube (2001) have shown how oral traditions and vernacular knowledge constituted crises of existence for the colonial programme in South Asia. While other decolonial scholars also attend to the significance of folk traditions, they do not generally contextualize folklore as part of a larger impetus towards decolonial praxis.

Language, power, and identity in colonial discourse and postcolonial subjectivity are discussed in the books of postcolonial theorists such as Said (1978), Spivak (1988), Fanon (1961), and Bhabha (1994). The concept of “hybridity” found in Bhabha (1994) and the inquiry into subaltern silence in Spivak (1988) speak to the necessity for new means of knowing. However, though it has every right to, folklore is little recognized as a legitimate postcolonial discourse capable of countering a colonial modernity.

In the Bangladeshi context, Baul song tradition, Mymensingh Geetika epic ballads, and indigenous season-based rituals have served as mediators of a living cultural memory and resistance (Ahmed: 2013; Islam: 2020). But here, in the academic community at large, folklore is often seen as a living, counter-systemic political force rather than something to be harvested and delivered into theory filtered by the sensibilities of ‘lived experience’ (from which lived experience was always sorely lacking). While Zaman (2018) and Karim (2021) have acknowledged the connection between war memory and folklore, the relationship has not been explored in such detail from a postcolonial angle.

Memory studies also have a sizable contribution to the field. Assmann (2011) and Connerton (1989) emphasize that memory culture is not written down in texts so much as physically enacted, performed, and relayed through oral and ritual genres (p. 113). These frameworks allow us to engage with folklore again and remember our past

whilst decolonizing the mind in communities, whose colonial histories sought to erase indigenous epistemologies.

Thus, this book fills an essential gap by bringing together folklore, postcolonial theory, and cultural memory and reclaiming the agency of folklore as a political discourse rather than relegating it to voicelessness as just a cultural artefact. The article aims to broaden our understanding of the role of folklore in negotiating identity, contesting power, and reclaiming histories rendered silent by focusing on Bangladesh while drawing comparisons with other postcolonial societies.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative form of research using an interpretive and critical paradigm was employed for this study. In particular, the focus here is on how folklore functions as a form of resistance and recovery of memory in Postcolonial stories. It relies on discourse analysis and semiotics to read folk texts as well as contemporary practices and performances in order to understand the semantics of meaning, politics, and identity.

Research Approach

This is a qualitative and interpretative approach, given that the subject we are studying concerns cultural ideations and semiotics. By centering the perspectives of people at the edge points, voices often relegated to the periphery by colonial and their postcolonial architectures (Cresswell, 2013), it allows detailed explorations of folklore as an experience and social practice.

Data Collection

The primary data sources in the present study are several Bangladeshi folk traditions such as oral narratives, Baul songs, regional ballads (Mymensingh Geetika), rituals, and mythologies. These were chosen for their historical basis and recognized cultural resistance statuses (Ahmed, 2013; Islam, 2020). 4 Additional readings related to other postcolonial sites of South Asia and from the Global South that deepen the analysis and provide wider theoretical insights are also included.

The first information sources were archive collections termed by other authors as archives of folklore texts, transcriptions of folk tales, or ethnographic documents in academic and cultural centers. When possible, semi-structured interviews with both folklorists and culture bearers fleshed out our understanding of context and contemporary views of the continuing value of folklore as resistance.

Data Analysis

Discourse analysis techniques are employed in interpreting the language, narrative typologies, and content of the folkloric document. This involves the identification of 'stock' figures of speech and of characters that articulate work against and identity demands. Semic interpretation and decoding of folklore's totems and rituals as carriers of cultural memory and subaltern knowledge assist with this (Eco, 1976; Geertz, 1973).

Postcolonial theory is the theoretical frame to understand how subversive postcolonial cultural texts of knowing that subvert colonizing (practices) construction and thus require disruption or contestation of dominant power structures (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994). The study consists of iterative reading and coding of data that reveal how folklore attempts to reshape muted histories and mediate alternative selves.

Ethical Consideration

Fair portrayal of marginalized communities was assured during the content, and acknowledgment of indigenous knowledge ensured appropriateness. Interviews were anonymised where required. It is also desirable within the study to be extremely sensitive to folklore intellectual property in its cultural significance outside the academic world (Smith 2012).

Limitations

With that in mind, the study acknowledged that archives can fall short of capturing folkloristic behavior as a dynamic phenomenon and one best observed in concert. Geography and Time Limitations shuttered access to in-person live performances, but limited the communities' stories collected simultaneously as well. These concerns, however, are mitigated by triangulating archival data with interviews and comparative analysis.

The methodological basis of this approach is critical theory, supplemented with information extracted from qualitative research methodologies. This makes it possible to analyze how folklore works as a weapon against colonialist suppression and for the memory recovery of the colonized.

Case 1: Baul Songs – Religious and Epistemic Resilience

The Bauls, a syncretic sect, are known for their mystic songs, and their less-structured performances were another inspiration behind his music, the influences of which also incorporate the music of Bengal. In this region, Hindu devotional music also draws from varied secular and small local cult roots. The Bauls of Bengal, represented mainly by Lalan Shah, are a sect established on syncretic spiritualism comprising Sufi Islam, Vaishnavism, and indigenous mysticism/ folk philosophy. Baul songs rebel against institutionalized religion and the imperialist attempt to rationalize the human experience. Their lyrical writings contest dichotomies such as sacred/profane and civilized/primitive (Knight, 2006; Salomon, 1998).

One of the most well-known verses of Lalon is:

“Manushe khachar dhaw manush pele” (“When you find the man, you find the golden man”) or Manush bhajle sonar manush pabi” (“Worship the human, and you will find the golden human”)

This song recasts the philosophy of inner divinity and human equality that opposed both the Brahminical casteism and British colonial hierarchies. The divinity of human form and the centrality of the human body as the divine vessel in the Baul traditions existed in opposition to colonial hierarchies and beliefs that degraded non-Western cosmologies. Also, the Baul repertoire was never properly catalogued but had been sung, so their loose, antisystemic nature has been retained instead of being resistant epistemologies (Roy, 2003).

Case 2: Mymensingh Geetika Gendered Subalternity and Folk Feminism

The Mymensingh Geetika constitutes epic ballads like "Mahua," "Maluya," and "Chandrabati," which have been transmitted from one generation to another through oral delivery. Many of these ballads portray women as strong characters who reject patriarchal conventions and oppressive traditions (Thompson, 1999).

Moreover, in the ballad of Mahua, a tribal girl in love with a merchant's son elopes and refuses to go through with a marriage arranged for her. Faced with this, she opts for death before dishonor. Moreover, her last song (as it has been orally reconstructed) is a lament:

"Amar nai praan re, tomar shathe khela shesh" ("I have no life left, my game with you is over")

The rise, collapse, and tragedy of Mahua as a reluctant resister serve as a metaphor for the potential for resistance by women within a deeply patriarchal and colonially delineated society. Her story is repeatedly performed in it, and the performance affirms indigenous womanhood and critiques feudal control over women's bodies (Spivak, 1988).

Case 3: Nabanna (new rice) Ritual Ecological Memory and Agrarian Resistance

Nabanna is a new harvest festival for the new crops and rice. In rural Bangladesh, the ceremony includes song, dance, and food sharing as acts of agrarian solidarity. During colonial times, festivals were disturbed by economic policies such as the Permanent Settlement Act (1793), which transformed land into a commodity and enhanced peasant exploitation (Chakrabarty, 2000).

A popular Nabanna song:

“Nabanna elo ghore, dhan keteche shorore” — the harvest has come home, the paddy is singing of joy. The songs are also attuned to a seasonality beyond capitalist conceptions of agricultural return — restoring cyclic time and commoning connection (Ahmed, 2013).

Case 4: NAKSHI KANTHA – Silent Witness of Rebellion in the Household

One of them is the Nakshi Kantha (embroidered quilt), a folk art whereby women embroider their everyday life, myths and personal trauma in fabric. These visual narratives also serve as a nonverbal archive of resistance. As another example, women sewed their lived experiences of violence and resistance into embroidered stories during the Liberation War (Jahan, 1996).

For certain quilts, these lines can include as a sewn line like this:

Nodi bhasha amar shonar praan ("My golden life floated away with the river")

It was spotted in the post-war kantha of the Kushtia district. It laments the missing and the lost ground. These remnants of memory subvert mediation and constitute a challenge to the void of histories and silence inflicted on women. (Nasreen, 2002).

Case 5: Proverbs and Palli-bhasha – Orality and Popular Resistance

So much of rustic Hindi idiom is buttressed with proverbs that constitute biting social commentary. This oral micro-narrative repertoire infuses folk political awareness and, paraphrasing a theoretical approach to state power or colonial rationality (Nilufer, 2015), is in effect somewhat parodically displacing it.

Examples include:

“Raja gelo rani gelo thaklo sudhu gramer goru”

That wily line mocks leadership failures and the betrayal of the core masses, even as it echoes from transitions into peasantries from colonial positions up through postcolonial rule.

Another:

“Opekkha korle futbe phul, taratari korle dukkhkho dhul”;

The proverb challenges the speed of capital with slow dumb time in tune with rural wisdom (Rahman, 2018).

Case 6: Jatra Theatre –A Political Allegory on the Stage

Jatra (traditional rural theatre) sometimes adopts religious or mythological tales that harness social injustice in the current day of society. Characters also often function as allegorical story boarders for colonial landlords or contemporary politicians (Haq, 2002).

Two simple yet effective lines from a Jatra on Ramayana.

"Raghur raja neko nirmam, paap kulehu kore dham-dham")

Such dramatizations are interpreted as veiled attacks on tyrannical authority, in which playback serves as a vehicle for processing social trauma and protesting oppression (Chowdhury, 2007).

These diverse folkloric materials —song and stitch, proverb and play—together show folklore not simply as a memory but also a site of mobilization, culture, and critique. They have similar histories and continue to effectuate postcolonial challenges for voice, dignity, and equity.

Result Analysis

The survey of Bangladeshi folk forms indicates this much when booming with dispositional offences of resistance, memory, and identity. Every single case study reveals how folk customs are counter-discourses to colonial and patriarchal stories.

Baul song provides an alternative epistemology that values human spirituality and bodily knowing above institutional religion and Western rationalism. As Knight (2006) demonstrates, the Baul tradition itself elides categories and, therefore, does the work of dismantling colonial binaries of primitive and civilized. Their oral status facilitates their flexibility and fluidity, which is a necessary aspect of epistemic resistance.

The Geetika ballads, particularly the story of Mahua, foreground gendered assertion in a feudal and colonial context. Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern woman is echoed in Mahua's narrative since her tragic voice is not one from official archives but one of collective orature. Ballads like these confirm that resistance can also be sad and empowering.

Performances such as Nabanna sustain an agrarian order from the pre-capitalist mode, acting as locations of ecological memory. Colonial modernity aimed to efface these seasonal, community-based rituals to transform instead into market-driven productivity (Chakrabarty 2000). Songs of Nabanna work against this eradication by perpetuating spiritual and communal connections to land.

As Jahan (1996) explains, Nakshi Kantha operates as a woman-authored historiography that weaves private trauma with collective survival. These quilts resist colonial historiography and male-dominated nationalist archives, providing a tightly woven, intimate memory archive.

Folklore proverbs and idioms, akin to curses and superstition, are your satirical sword, your protest dagger. According to Rahman (2018) and Nilufer (2015), these forms transmit popular political critique from one generation to the next. They allow for resistance in new democratic ways, within everyday language.

Lastly, Jatra theatre is another form of myth turned into allegory—by depicting these stories, audiences from rural areas can find a common ground by telling each other what the problems we can comment on all that occurs in contemporary politics. As Haq (2002) emphasizes, performance is a working through of trauma and injustice together as collective agents, particularly in the lens of Jatra by Jatras from Lumbini Foundation.

Clausewitz in Bangladesh. These contexts explain that Bangladesh folklore is more a competitive living domain than a static tradition collection in which memory, identity, and resistance are continuously challenged as well as elaborated.

DISCUSSION

This aspect of the analysis contributes to postcolonial folklore broadly by locating Bangladeshi oral and performative practices as adaptive sites of resistance, identity creation, and cultural memory. As a feature of passive heritage or as an aesthetic fact, folklore is analysed mostly in sterile terms, but it also has dynamic political capabilities and functions effectively when colonized or postcolonial frames are considered.

A natural follow-up to Spivak (1988): Can the subaltern speak? —resonates with those many folkloric shapes just named above. With Mahua, however, the subaltern does speak—not in the official archive, but in the form of re-enacted community performance. Her story is not merely remembered but ritualized, circumventing the erasures of colonial historiography.

With the Baul songs, colonial binaries and caste hierarchies are troubled, and an epistemology of the South (de Sousa Santos, 2014) is put forth. These songs make evident the tacit and empirical systems of knowledge and ontologies that colonial modernity mendaciously dismissed or rendered void all along. They embody what Mignolo (2011) terms “border thinking”—an act of refusing imperial epistemes by dwelling in local, embodied wisdoms.

Ecological rituals such as Nabanna are re-rooted in Indigenous relationships with land and time and offer a powerful critique of capitalist and colonial regimes. Such rituals, seen from the perspective of environmental humanities and political ecology, are essential records of resistance to dispossession and ecological imperialism (Nixon, 2011).

Examples of post-memory, the domestication of inherited trauma by feminists (Marianne Hirsch 2008), are to be found in Nakshi Kantha. It becomes a historic record as war, loss, and longing are stitched into women's labour. These works respond to gendered silence through feminist counter-archives.

In addition, using proverbs and idioms as vehicles for oral resistance resonates with the notion of 'hidden transcripts' elaborated by James Scott (1990). These utterances allow marginalized peoples to (subversively) challenge authority by employing language that is frequently free from censure or violent retribution.

Performing political allegory in myth, the Jatra theatre is Bakhtin's carnival through which social hierarchies are inverted and public criticism is elucidated through humor and reversal. What this shows is that folklore is a public sphere of the democratic kind in rural communities.

This study suggests that the folklore of a subject like Bangladesh serves simultaneously as cultural memory and insurgent archive. By emphasizing voices of the rural poor, bodies and voices that have been rendered subaltern and performative resistance, *How We Forget* confronts existing historiography (overly dictated by written accounts of elites). In doing so, it positions folklore as an urgent and vital postcolonial world-making practice.

RECOMMENDATION

The article concludes with implications for cultural policy, higher education practitioners, and researchers who wish to extend the scope of postcolonial engagement and guard the indigenous knowledge systems from which we derive.

Additions to national curricula from folk culture: Baul songs, Geetika ballads, Jatra narratives, overheard folk songs, adages, and axioms to be included in literature/history/civics textbooks by the ministries of education. This will enable students to consider Indigenous epistemology, ecocentric ethics, and historical gender consciousness.

Create Decolonial cultural archives [Collections of archives and museums in digital form: Promote digital archive programmes through government, NGOs, and universities] where oral narratives, folk songs, visual narratives like Nakshi Kantha, etc., are recorded and preserved: Collect repositories with a participatory approach, with value given to local knowledge holders, more specifically, rural women and artisans.

Back Community-Based Performative Practices: Institutions must respect and care for community performance venues of art forms—Jatra, Baul music, or seasonal ones like Nabanna. Urbanization, commercialization, and neglect imperil these traditions. Only by fleshing out these characters will the chain of value > protest > self-identity > belonging from one generation to the next be improved.

Collective Folklore for Work and Healing: Story-telling, embroidery, performance as therapy in post-conflict contexts of Bangladesh and other postcolonial societies. On the other hand, while it cautions and pleads with poets and people about danger (and Johny also marries this to judgement), folklore—particularly women's creative labour—culls culturally inscribed safer terrains of memory and resistance.

Comparative and Global Research: Follow-up research can expand this complex with respect to postcolonial India, Africa, and Latin America. It cannot be universal because then we have access to all of the commonalities between the resistance, the colonial trauma, and the indigenous revivalism.

Of these, this proposal shows how folklore is not a history—it is present and active, critical enough to play a role in cultural policy, social justice, and the national building process in postcolonial situations like Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

The study finds that pluralistic folklore can serve as a tool of resistance and religious memory and reconquering identity within the postcolonial situation in Bangladesh. The scope of this branch of the study includes how oral narratives, performative arts, ritual systems, and even the daily enactments show a common thread with other performances to illustrate, as a tool, how subaltern voices—particularly women, the rural masses, and suppressed religious sects—belong through which they contest against the underpinnings of hegemonic power, colonial amnesia, and socio-political marginalization.

The six case studies presented here, from Baul songs to Nakshi Kantha and Jatra theatre, have shown the diversities of folklore as a living insurgent archive. These media are all embodiments of poetic forms that refuse to submit, of invigorating trans-gender linguistic practices in Geetika ballads, ecological awareness in Nabanna rituals (and beyond), a history written in stitches on embroidered canvases or through visual historiographies stitched into quilts. Each one witnesses imagination, creativity, and subaltern power.

It also contributes to postcolonial theory in conversation with critical voices from Spivak to Mignolo, de Sousa Santos, and Scott, as it affirms the epistemic validity of indigenous knowledge systems and the political significance of cultural performing. “Folklore is not a dead tradition but a living field of contest and creativity” — Southern Folklife Collection, UNC-Chapel Hill. From the collections and databases that we highlighted in NUMBER TWO above, it is obvious that folklore is not a dormant stockpile, but a contested field.

In sum, caught up with the case of postcolonial Bangladesh folklore is not decorative nostalgia and certainly not a theoretical residuum of the cultural edge. Testifying is a necessary, affective, and political practice where groups bear witness to their grievances in order to protest injustice, maintain memory-making, and inspire visions of more equitable futures. And for these postcolonial peoples, still finding their footing in global modernity, folklore is a pivotal battleground of epistemic justice and cultural autonomy.

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