

# Symbolic Narratives in Motion: Rickshaw Painting as Art in Chattogram, Bangladesh

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## Abstract

This article explores the artistic value of the treasured world of rickshaw painting in the commercial capital of Bangladesh, Chattogram and aims at demonstrating its essential role in representing Bangladeshi art and culture as an intangible cultural heritage. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, the study discusses over twenty paintings gathered from Chattogram's (one of Bangladesh's major cities) streets. This academic initiative provides a window into the conscious and the unconscious of the rickshaw artists and rickshaw pullers, and a practical lens for understanding the cultural significance of rickshaw painting as art, reaffirming its timeless and widespread impact. The article reveals findings that accentuate the cultural and psychological depth within these paintings, highlighting their beauty and elegance as symbolic narratives that go beyond mere aesthetics. The research demonstrates that rickshaw paintings act as a cultural mirror, reflecting the rich heritage of Bangladesh. It surpasses a surface-level exploration, emphasizing that these artistic and symbolic representations are more than fleeting images; rather, they are enduring reflections of Bangladeshi identity that transcend temporal and spatial boundaries. This article contributes to scholarly discussions, especially in cultural studies by reaffirming the symbolic narratives and lasting artistic significance of rickshaw painting in Chattogram.

## Keywords:

Rickshaw painting in Chattogram, Bangladeshi art, cultural and psychological representation, symbolic narratives, cultural studies

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The moving rickshaws are viewed as a roving exhibition of paintings—a mobile panorama which is seen nowhere else in the world.

Firoz Mahmud (2015, p. 160)

## Introduction

The initiative of writing this paper astonishingly coincides with UNESCO's recognition of Dhaka's rickshaw painting as "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" (UNESCO, 2023). The study involves an academic exhibition of Rickshaw Painting comprising seven groups of students of the course titled, 'Bangladeshi Art and Culture' at Chittagong Independent University's Department of English. The article bears special significance as it collects data from a major city of Bangladesh, Chattogram (formerly Chittagong) and analyses them critically, adding academic value as well as authenticity in the discussion.

Originating in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century (Gallagher, 1992, p. 27), the rickshaw (*Ricksha in Bangla*) is a bipedal, three-wheeled mode of transport used for carrying both passengers and goods. Rickshaw painting gained international recognition in the 1970s when the renowned Bangladeshi artist Zainul Abedin showcased a collection of rickshaw paintings in Tokyo (Islam, 2015, p. 123). While describing Rickshaw paintings' beauty, Wheeler and I'Anson say,

[A] fully decorated, shiny new rickshaw will start out with plastic flowers in jars bolted in front of the handlebars. Streamer and coloured tape decorate the bars, the seats are brightly painted, the folding top is vividly embroidered, and the rickshaw body is plated with brilliant chrome, studded and painted. (Wheeler & Anson, 1998)

In Dhaka, "New rickshaws are a blaze of color. Every square inch is decorated. Tassels, tinsel and twirly bits hang from all parts. Plastic flowers sprout in the front and sides, and pictures and patterns are painted or pinned all over it. The overall effect is spectacular" (Gallagher, 1992). Joanna Kirkpatrick describes these rickshaws as the world's largest moving art gallery (Kirkpatrick, 2003). Despite having limited formal education in art, craft, and culture, Bangladeshi rickshaw painters select images that capture contemporary social, political, and cultural issues from their perspective. They depict folkloric, cinematic, political, and commercial imagery "depicting their heart's desires as well as their religious devotion" (Komal, 2017).

Since cultural and artistic productions represent the culture in which they are produced, the rickshaw painting, though apparently ordinary on Bangladeshi streets, can be described from sociocultural perspectives and given symbolic interpretations. Effortlessly painted, the rickshaw art speaks of the romance, 'the weariness, the fever, and the fret' of the weary people who pull them, commonly known as '*rickshawallas*' (rickshaw pullers). This 'people's art', as Kirkpatrick defines it, also reflects social injustice and unpredictable economic functions as the poor pullers apprehend in their constant challenges against price hike in Bangladesh, which causes "decreased purchasing power, reduced living standard, increased poverty" and leave their lives "negatively impacted" (Emon, 2023). As the rickshaw pullers are, to speak generally, rural migrants, their pathetic detachment from family is also reflected in this art.

As a result, one of the common paintings behind the back plate of a rickshaw is a beautiful woman standing, a family picture or a pastoral domicile amidst leafy flower gardens, epitomizing their imagination of rest and repose. Hence, understanding this ‘intangible heritage’ of Bangladesh can be a way of understanding the life and worldview of these “vulnerable communities” (Prins, 2017).

The fact that religious rituals are remarkably observed in Chattogram is indicated in many of these paintings. Put differently, the religious figures and symbols are some of the most common topics in rickshaw art. For example, Muslim artists draw *Buraq* (a supernatural horse), mosques and *dorghas* (shrines of saints) while Hindu artists introduce gods and goddesses such as Krishna along with Kamadhenu (a divine cow), Kali and Durga. Dispensing with such images, some of the rickshaw artists focus on family and psychological values of the rural people of this region in diverse calligraphic designs. This calligraphy contains some proverbs and aphorisms emphasizing parental love, filial responsibility as in *মায়ের দোয়া* (blessings of mother), very common in the paintings. Alongside some religious and local maxims, this calligraphic art conveys social awareness such as *ছেলে হোক মেয়ে হোক, দুই সন্তানই যথেষ্ট* (whether boy or girl, only two children are enough for a family), which draws attention to the concern of the overpopulation of the region/country. Importantly, apart from the representation of the local culture, these paintings also portray the national issues of the country: the changing political realities of Bangladesh can be glimpsed in many of the paintings. In harmony with the political party in power, they also interchange the political leaders of different parties. Interestingly, these paintings, off and on, expose the artists’ political biases.

Another common type in the art is the painted poster of Bangladeshi popular cinema. These stunning posters mainly cover the genre of social drama of Bangladeshi cinema, which deals with poverty-stricken commoners with a muscular hero defending their rights against the torture of the local *matabbars* (headmen). Notably, one popular hero of Bangladeshi cinema, Jashim (1950–98), who mostly acted in these social-themed films, was once a common picture in these paintings.

In fact, the rickshaw paintings of Chattogram cover too many diverse topics to be covered in one academic paper. They are not only fleeting, spectacular paintings; they rather manifest the views of the rickshaw artists and the minds of the pullers. Collectively, they palpably represent the cultural identity of Bangladeshi working classes embodied in these visual and calligraphic arts, covering social, political, familial, economic and religious values and issues. Hence, this pop art is of paramount significance in academic studies, in cultural and anthropological discourses in particular. Unfortunately, these ‘moving masterpieces’ (Rickshaw and or a shift) are gradually declining. Owing to the availability of advanced vehicleless such as metro rail and green auto rickshaw, the foot-driven rickshaw with the creative art on it is in a threat of extinction (Prins, 2017). It is untenable that this art that has a huge cultural and social significance is not adequately focused in critical discussion. Thus, the desideratum is now to contextualize this rare art in academia. Accordingly, this paper argues for the continuance, importance and relevance of this art which deserves inclusion in cultural discourse, creative art and scholarly discussion.

## Literature Review and Methodology

This section will review some extant literature pertinent to rickshaw painting in Bangladesh, show evident research gaps and provide a brief methodology sub-section at the end. Safia Azim's article "Learning to Read the Signs" explores the rich tradition of decorating vehicles in Bangladesh, particularly in Dhaka, known as the 'rickshaw capital of the world' (Azim, 2015, p. 34). She opines that unlike abstract designs, Bangladesh's vehicular art predominantly features figurative, naturalistic, geometric, and epigraphic elements, often conveying multiple meanings (p. 34). As she states, the utilization of maternal symbols like "mother's arms (*Ma'er kolay*) or the "solace in the folds of her sari" (*Ma'er anchol*) in rickshaw paintings in Bangladesh serves not only as a talisman for protection but also conveys a profound ethical code deeply rooted in Bengali culture (p. 38). The rickshaw artist S M Samsu says, "In our Bengali culture and values, a mother occupies a very special place that makes her irreplaceable, no one compares to her and no one cares for us more" (qtd. in Azim, 2015, p. 38).

References to the creator, *Allah* (as Muslims refer to God), and expressions of gratitude such as *Allah'r daan* (The Grace of God) are prevalent in rickshaw paintings, representing cultural beliefs and values deeply entrenched in Bengali society. Azim asserts that acknowledging the creator is not only a sign of respect but also serves an "apotropaic function", warding off bad luck and ensuring the continuation of blessings (Azim, 2015, p. 39). By invoking religious phrases and exhortations to prayer, rickshaw art bears a sense of humility and reverence, reinforcing the belief in divine providence and protection.

Nazmul Islam's comprehensive study highlights the rickshaw's central role as a pedal-driven mode of transportation in Dhaka, primarily used for passenger transport (Islam, 2015, p. 35). Islam discusses the ornate nature of Dhaka's rickshaws, characterized by vigorous decorations and complex embellishments. These decorations include plastic flowers, streamers, colored tape, embroidered folding tops, and chromed bodies, contributing to a visually striking appearance. Importantly, the design patterns employed reflect local artistic motifs, serving as mobile representations of Bangladeshi folk art (p. 35). In brief, Islam's study aims to document the traditional rickshaw-making process and the contributions of artisans, recognizing their craftsmanship and the cultural heritage implanted in these handcrafted vehicles. It emphasizes the necessity of preserving this local technology amidst the emergence of battery-powered tricycles and the gradual replacement of traditional rickshaw art with printed images. Through illustrating rickshaw workshops and artisans' studios, the article provides insight into the rich artistic traditions and informal workspaces where these iconic vehicles are produced.

Another significant article titled, "Rickshaw Art: An Emblematic Visual Culture and Social Awareness Tool in Bangladesh" by Sadia Afrin, highlights the cultural importance of rickshaw art in Bangladesh, emphasizing its role in conveying social, cultural, religious, and philosophical messages. As the author asserts, the colorful paintings on rickshaw back plates and hoods serve as mobile canvases for social awareness, with rickshaw painters and pullers acting as agents of social transformation (Afrin, 2023, p. 103).

Rickshaw artists implant their philosophical and ideological beliefs in their art, addressing socio-political and cultural issues through vivid, kitschy expressions. They recognize the challenge of raising “social awareness” in densely populated Bangladesh and strive to contribute to social development and consciousness through their creative efforts (p. 108). The article stresses remarkably on the message rickshaw paintings contain and their significance in a country like Bangladesh:

The frequently noticeable messages that rickshaw art portrays are issues related to social problems. There are lots of problems that exist in the society of Bangladesh. It is an overpopulated country where a mentionable number of people are illiterate and they live under the poverty line. Rickshaw art helps raise consciousness among the underprivileged about social issues. Social media campaigns, talk shows, human rights campaigns, etc. are held to raise awareness among the common people regarding socio-political issues. (Afrin, 2023, p. 109)

Firoz Mahmud’s article is an important inclusion in the academic discussion pertinent rickshaw painting in Bangladesh. The transmission of rickshaw painting skills is primarily through a “hands-on-training”, and “teacher-pupil” method, asserting imitation and gestures. Apprentices gain creativity through enjoyment and devotion to their craft (Mahmud, 2015, p. 162). This knowledge is typically passed down to children and close relatives, ensuring the continuity of this traditional art form. Rickshaw painting originated with depictions of movie “stars in the 1950s”, a theme that continues to evolve with changing cultural trends (p. 164). While movie stars serve as transient symbols, their popularity dictates their presence in rickshaw artwork. As icons rise and fall in public favor, their images dominate the repertoire of rickshaw artists accordingly. Like Safia Azim (2015) as discussed above, Mahmud also focuses predominant usage of religious symbols in the paintings. Rickshaw paintings frequently incorporate religious motifs that resonate with the predominant beliefs of the population. Popular religious symbols include mosques, the *Ka’bah*, and blessings written in Arabic script. The Taj Mahal has also been a recurring theme, often mistakenly referred to as a mosque by both artists and pullers, reflecting a blend of cultural influences in the artwork (Mahmud, 2015, p. 168).

To sum up, Firoz Mahmud’s article offers an exploration of the cultural significance and artistic expression embodied in the iconic rickshaws of Dhaka. The article highlights how a rickshaw painting serves as a dynamic form of visual storytelling, depicting themes ranging from everyday life to animals to religious beliefs. It explores the transmission of artistic knowledge and skills from experienced artists to apprentices, affirming the role of hands-on training and creativity in the process. Furthermore, it discusses the evolution of rickshaw painting themes over time, from depictions of movie stars to religious symbolism like mosques and the Taj Mahal, illustrating the changing cultural milieu of Dhaka City through these vivid mobile artworks.

The collective findings of Azim (2015), Islam (2015), Afrin (2023), and Mahmud (2015) assert the multi-layered significance of rickshaw painting in Bangladesh’s cultural scene. Their studies reveal how rickshaw art serves as a visual medium for conveying messages about social, cultural, religious, and national issues, reflecting narratives and identities of Bangladeshi society.

Moreover, they highlight the role of rickshaw painters and pullers as agents of social awareness, disseminating ideologies and beliefs through their creative expressions. Additionally, their research analyzes the transmission of artistic knowledge and skills within the rickshaw painting community, pointing out the intergenerational continuity and creativity inherent in this traditional craft.

However, despite these valuable insights, notable research gaps remain in the existing literature. Firstly, while the authors offer rich qualitative analyses of rickshaw painting, there is a limited focus on empirical data collection from the field, such as direct observations and interviews with rickshaw artists and pullers. This gap suggests a need for more comprehensive field research to provide a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dynamics shaping rickshaw painting practices in Bangladesh. Symbolic interpretation of art is an essential aspect of analyzing art (Battistini, 2002; Wilson, 2020). Since the existing literature hardly offers such an interpretation of rickshaw paintings, it is necessary that this art receives a symbolic interpretation that creates a window into the psychological cravings and social experiences of both rickshaw artists and rickshaw pullers. Furthermore, in the current academic studies, there is a glaring absence of specifically examining the rickshaw painting in Chattogram, the commercial capital of Bangladesh. Given the city's unique socio-cultural context and significance within the country, this represents a crucial gap in the existing literature that warrants further investigation. Future research should aim at addressing these lacunae by conducting fieldwork-based studies in Chattogram, offering insights into the distinct expressions and practices of rickshaw painting in this important urban center.

A concise overview of the methodology employed in this paper will now be presented. This study is inherently ethnographic based on the live experience of the authors. It employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both a review of existing literature and the collection of primary data through fieldwork. Seven groups of students (Group A-G) from the course 'Bangladeshi Art and Culture' at Chittagong Independent University meticulously gathered over twenty rickshaw paintings from the streets of Chattogram. Additionally, these students conducted interviews with rickshaw pullers to gain deeper insights into the cultural significance and personal narratives behind the artwork. The combination of literature review and field data enables a comprehensive analysis, providing a solid framework to examine the cultural, artistic and aesthetic dimensions of rickshaw painting in Chattogram. This methodology ensures that the study not only builds on established scholarly work but also contributes original findings through first-hand observations and interviews.

### **The Selected Rickshaw Painting: Multifarious Expressions**

The selected rickshaw paintings of this study serve as powerful canvases embodying the cultural essence and diversity of Chattogram. However, the authors are with the opinion that these selected paintings are not only representative of rickshaw art in Chattogram but also of Bangladesh. Through seven groups of students, we attempt to unravel the multifaceted expressions captured within these colorful artworks adorning the streets of Chattogram. From themes of national pride to rural tranquility, religious symbolism to personal narratives, each painting tells a unique story, knitting together the threads of Bangladeshi identity and heritage.

The selected paintings are discussed below along with their themes, symbolism as well as cultural significance. For the sake of an organized discussion, the groups will be addressed alphabetically (e.g., Group A, Group B) and some of the quotations from rickshaw pullers will be added into the discussion.

### National Identity and Patriotism

A prevalent theme observed across multiple groups is the portrayal of Bangladesh's national identity and patriotism in rickshaw paintings. Group A highlights a painting featuring national emblems and symbols, commemorating the nation's struggles and achievements. The rickshaw puller proudly asserts, "This picture is the proof of my country's struggle. I am proud of my nation," highlighting the deep-rooted sense of pride and patriotism associated with these artworks.



*Figure 1 and 2: Two of the paintings collected by Group A*

Similarly, Group D notes the presence of the national flag on a rickshaw, symbolizing "national pride and identity" for the rickshaw puller. The inclusion of national symbols in rickshaw paintings serves as an emotive reminder of the sacrifices made by freedom fighters and martyrs, honoring their enduring legacy and contribution to the nation's independence in 1971. Additionally, the depiction of historical landmarks and monuments further reinforces the theme of national identity and pride in rickshaw paintings. Group B encounters paintings featuring iconic landmarks such as the *Shaheed Minar* (a national monument in Dhaka), paying homage to Bangladesh's rich cultural heritage and history of struggle. These artworks serve as visual evidence of the nation's resilience and determination in the face of adversity, nurturing a sense of unity and solidarity among viewers.

### Rural Serenity and Nostalgia

The bucolic charm of Bengal's rural landscapes emerges as a recurring motif in some of the selected rickshaw paintings, evoking a sense of serenity and nostalgia. Group B describes paintings depicting lush green fields, meandering rivers, and quaint mud huts, reminiscent of the rickshaw puller's own village home. These depictions of rural life serve as touching reminders of the simplicity and beauty of Bangladesh's countryside.

Moreover, Group F encounters paintings showcasing serene village scenes with riverside cottages and chirping birds, affectionately referred to as *Gram Banglas* (country side of Bengal). These artworks evoke feelings of nostalgia and longing, transporting viewers to a world steeped in tradition and tranquility. Furthermore, the portrayal of everyday activities and rituals in rural settings adds depth and authenticity to rickshaw paintings. Group G observes paintings depicting farmers working in paddy fields and women collecting water from wells, capturing the essence of rural life in Bangladesh. These artworks celebrate the amenability and resourcefulness of rural communities, highlighting their vital contributions to the nation's economy and cultural heritage.



Figure 3 and 4: Two of the paintings collected by Group F and G respectively

### Floral Elegance and Aesthetic Beauty

Floral motifs ornamenting rickshaw paintings not only add an element of aesthetic beauty but also serve as symbolic representations of Bangladeshi culture and heritage. Group A emphasizes floral designs and vibrant color palettes employed by local artists, highlighting the meticulous craftsmanship and attention to detail evident in these artworks. The vivacious hues of blossoming flowers evoke a sense of vitality, transforming the humble rickshaw into a mobile canvas teeming with life, energy and pristineness.

Furthermore, the use of floral motifs in rickshaw paintings reflects the cultural significance of flowers in Bangladeshi society. Group C observes paintings featuring water lilies, Bangladesh's national flower, signifying purity, beauty, and resilience. These floral depictions not only celebrate the natural beauty of the country's flora but also pay homage to Bangladesh's rich botanical heritage. The inclusion of floral motifs in rickshaw paintings serves as a visual celebration of Bangladesh's varied ecosystems and floral diversity, fostering a deeper appreciation for the country's natural treasures.

Moreover, the incorporation of traditional patterns and designs further enhances the aesthetic appeal of rickshaw paintings. Group E experiences paintings bejeweled with detailed geometric patterns and stylized floral motifs, showcasing the fusion of traditional craftsmanship with contemporary artistic expressions. These ornate designs serve as pictorial reminders of Bangladesh's artistic traditions, spanning centuries of cultural exchange and creativity. By blending traditional motifs with modern sensibilities, rickshaw painters create artworks that resonate with viewers, bridging the gap between past and present, tradition and innovation.



## Religious Symbolism and Devotion

Religious themes and symbols play a significant role in shaping the narrative of rickshaw paintings, reflecting the spiritual beliefs and cultural heritage of the Bangladeshi people. Group E observes paintings depicting mosques, stars, and moons, symbolizing the rickshaw puller's religious faith and devotion. These religious motifs serve as expressions of piety and reverence, underscoring the spiritual significance of rickshaw paintings in Bangladeshi society.

Furthermore, the depiction of religious narratives and mythological stories adds depth to rickshaw paintings. Group G collects paintings featuring scenes from Hindu epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, displaying the multicultural and multi-religious fabric of Bangladeshi society. These artworks serve as visual representations of religious multiplicity and harmony, celebrating the coexistence of different faiths and beliefs within the region of Chattogram.

Moreover, the inclusion of religious symbols in rickshaw paintings serves as a form of cultural preservation and identity expression. Group D notes the presence of Hindu deities and symbols in paintings commissioned by rickshaw pullers, reflecting their cultural heritage and religious upbringing.



Figure 5 and 6: Two of the paintings collected by Group E and B respectively

These artworks serve as visual reminders of Bangladesh's rich religious harmony, fostering a sense of unity and inclusivity among diverse communities. By incorporating religious symbolism into rickshaw paintings, artists pay homage to Chattogram's spiritual traditions, celebrating the interconnectedness of faith and culture in Bangladeshi society.

## Personal Stories and Struggles

Beyond thematic motifs, rickshaw paintings also serve as expressions of personal stories and struggles, offering insights into the lived experiences of rickshaw pullers and their communities. Group F encounters paintings chosen by rickshaw pullers to reflect their own experiences and aspirations. Group G observes paintings depicting scenes from daily life, such as street vendors selling fruits and vegetables, children playing in the streets, and families gathering for meals. These artworks celebrate the vitality of urban life in Bangladesh, capturing the essence of community and camaraderie. Group E highlights paintings featuring symbols and motifs that hold personal significance for rickshaw pullers, such as ancestral homes, family crests, and religious icons.

By sharing their stories through rickshaw paintings, artists preserve their legacies for future generations, ensuring that their voices are heard and their experiences remembered.

### **Multifarious Expressions in the Paintings**

Through themes of local/national identity and patriotism, rural serenity and nostalgia, floral elegance and aesthetic beauty, religious symbolism and devotion, as well as personal stories and struggles, rickshaw paintings emerge as powerful reflections of Bangladeshi life, culture and heritage. The prevalent theme of regional/national identity and patriotism accentuates the deep-rooted sense of pride and reverence associated with Bangladesh's history and heritage. Paintings featuring national emblems and symbols serve as a moving reminder of the sacrifices made by freedom fighters and martyrs, honoring their enduring legacy and contribution to the nation's independence. Additionally, the depiction of iconic landmarks and historical monuments further reinforces the theme of national pride, promoting a sense of unity and solidarity among viewers.

In parallel, the bucolic charm of Bengal's rural landscapes evokes feelings of serenity and nostalgia, bringing viewers to a world steeped in tradition and tranquility. Paintings depicting lush green fields, meandering rivers, and quaint mud huts serve as visual testaments to the simplicity and beauty of Bangladesh's countryside. Furthermore, the portrayal of everyday activities and rituals in rural settings adds depth and authenticity to rickshaw paintings, celebrating the chasteness and resourcefulness of rural communities.

The floral designs and vibrant color palettes employed by local artisans highlight the meticulous craftsmanship and attention to detail evident in these creations. Moreover, the incorporation of traditional patterns and designs serves as visual reminders of Bangladesh's rich artistic traditions, bridging the gap between past and present, convention and innovation. As it can be understood from the selected paintings, religious themes and symbols play a significant role in shaping the narrative of rickshaw paintings, reflecting the spiritual beliefs and cultural heritage of the Bangladeshi people. Paintings featuring mosques, stars, moons, and scenes from Hindu epics emphasize the multicultural and multi-religious fabric of Bangladeshi society. Additionally, the inclusion of religious symbols serves as a form of cultural preservation and identity expression, honoring the interconnectedness of faith and culture in Bangladeshi society.

Finally, it could be claimed that rickshaw paintings in Chattogram reinforce aesthetic appeal, serving as dynamic expressions of Bangladeshi culture, heritage, and identity. Through themes of national pride, rural nostalgia, floral elegance, religious devotion, and personal narratives, these artworks weave together the richness of Bangladeshi society, celebrating its diversity, resilience, and enduring spirit. As observed from the selected paintings, Chattogram's rickshaw paintings are as important as that of the capital city of Dhaka, and they offer glimpses into the heart and soul of Bangladesh.

### **Cultural Depth and Symbolic Narratives**

Like literary texts, almost all artistic productions shape and are shaped by the culture in which they emerge (Tyson, 2015, p. 280).

It is even sharper in Bangladeshi artistic productions like texts, music, visual art and painting. For example, one of the most famous dialogues of Bangladeshi cinema is ছেড়ে দে, শয়তান! তুই আমার দেহ পাবি, কিন্তু মন পানিবা (Ungrip me, the devil. You will get my body, not mind). Some may find it as an uncouth expression, but on a deeper examination, this dialogue reveals multilinear bondage in the Bangladeshi (historical) experience, including the British colonial dominance and Pakistani regime's repression and the existent geopolitical hegemony. Reacting to the public sentiment against an exam question (in university level) based on this dialogue, Syed Faiz Ahmed, senior editor of the *Prothom Alo*, one of the most popular Bangladeshi national dailies, endorses that this dialogue implies the imperialist control of Bangladesh and the resistance of subjugated Bangladeshis (Ahmed, 2023). Similarly, this rickshaw art, which may be regarded by some as ordinary and unrefined, represents huge cultural depth and symbolic narratives.

Figure 1 and 2 suggest historical, national, familial and aesthetic sense of a common Chittagonian /Bangladeshi. The calligraphy of মায়ের দোয়া (mother's blessing) in Figure 1 may symbolically refer to either demise of or detachment from the mother of the puller/artist who, a rural migrant, misses his mother in a harsh urban (slum) life where people treat them with cruelty and misbehavior on the fair bargain in fixing the rickshaw fare. The national bird of Bangladesh, martyr monument of the 1952 Language Movement and Bangladeshi national flag display the growing awareness of Bangladeshi nationalism in the post-Independent Bangladesh. However, the picture of doel bird – the national bird of Bangladesh – which is an imprint on a currency note (Two Taka note) may also imply the need and harsh reality of money as felt by economically impoverished people like the rickshaw artists and pullers. In Figure 2, the picture of flowers is not only the aesthetic exposition of these people but also their imagination of love, beauty and serenity which they have to awfully disregard due to the pressure of toiling hard and earning money.

Apart from the aesthetic and imaginative concerns as stated above, Figure 3 and 4 can be seen as a juxtaposition of urban and pastoral settings, the contrast of urban reality and idyllic village which they comprehend every moment of their lives. Figure 3 delineates a city in an intriguing balance of high-rise buildings, river, trees and birds: an image of an ideal city against a bleak picture of Bangladeshi overcrowded cities such as Chattogram and Dhaka, in which trees are dying and rivers have already died. Interestingly, the thinking of an inhabitable city which should have been the foremost concerns of the city corporations and developers is the imagination of the artists. Pitted against their everyday realities in cities, their minds cannot forget the village they left for earning a livelihood. As a result, the imagination of a tranquil village is reflected on Figure 4.

The images in Figure 5 and 6 can be given numerous symbolic and cultural interpretations. In omission of the calligraphy of মায়ের দোয়া and the image of village, described above, another image of Figure 5 contains a sticker that shows the unavoidable license number of a particular rickshaw. Alongside this is an image of the moon and the symbol of a mosque suggesting Eid al-Fitr, the main celebration of the Muslim community in Chattogram/Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup>Someone from city of Chittagong (now Chattogram)

Another image here suggests kite flying, one of the very common Bangladeshi festivals, especially among children, during the winter season. Both of the pictures indicate the artists' flight into joy and oblivion of the stricture of life.

Probably, the most enigmatic painting included in this study is the one, Figure 6, in which two eyes glare in an inscrutable manner, as inscrutable as the Mona-Lisa eye in the half-length portrait painting by Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci. Apparently, as the eyes of the goddess Kali, they may have been compared to the inexorable eyes of a totalitarian government as seen in George Orwell's 1949 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the eyes that are still prevalent almost everywhere in the world. It may have metaphysical import in the sense that whenever the pullers are humiliated by the passengers, they end up saying, God is seeing everything. In this sense, these eyes have a commonality with the pair of eyes of *The Eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg* in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which, apparently painted on an advertising billboard, are interpreted as the eyes of God looking down on society in judgment.

Apart from the pictures collected by the students, the inclusion of the two more pictures, common in the countrywide rickshaw paintings, necessitates here in trope with the symbolic interpretation of the art. These include the portrait of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh (Figure 7), and that of Jashim, one of the most popular action heroes of Bangladeshi social drama cinema (Figure 8).



**Figure 7 and 8:** the paintings of the 1971 Independence War and Action Hero, Jashim

The spirit of Independence and the suffering during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, through which Bangladesh freed itself from Pakistan and emerged as an independent state are arguably the most common themes in Bangladeshi art productions, both verbal and visual. Elora Halim Chowdhury (2018) reaffirms that film, fiction, personal essays, and memoir provide a rich archive to personal and national suffering during the War of Independence. Influenced by the nationalist spirit, Rickshaw painters have constantly drawn images from their imagination of what happened during the 1971 historic war. Figure 7 bears striking evidence of this theme. It embodies three major aspects of the War: 1) an effigy of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Father of the Nation, who fought for life against the Pakistani unjust rule and led the Liberation War, 2) an armed troupe of freedom fighters fighting and killing the invaders of (West) Pakistani army and 3) the freedom procession of the Bangladeshi people after the submission of the Pakistani army on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1971.

Unfortunately, such narratives of Bangladesh history and identity as represented in the rickshaw paintings are hardly recognized in intellectual discussions, let alone in academic discourse.

As mentioned earlier, Bangladeshi cinema is multifariously reflected in the Bangladeshi rickshaw art. The artists choose the social-themed films and paint the posters on them giving expressions to social injustice and resistance against it. That is why the portrayal of different action attitudes of almost all action heroes of Bangladeshi cinema still occupies a central position in rickshaw painting. Accordingly, probably the most popular action hero Jashim is painted (in Figure 8) with an expression of না (No), brandishing a no (no more) to all types of injustice constantly perpetrated on this subaltern community of Bangladeshi society. Unable to physically resist or verbally protest, the pullers subconsciously assume the roles of the action heroes who defend the rights of the deprived class of people and find a cathartic relief of repressed emotions. Hence, this trope of painting has immense artistic and social values.

An artwork of whatever media, eras and contexts always represents human condition on earth, sometimes tangibly, sometimes allegorically and sometimes symbolically. Different aspects of life and mind of the 'rickshaw community' are symbolically exemplified in the rickshaw painting of Chattogram. The paintings represent their pains, pleasures and penchants. On the one hand, they become the artists 'expressions of their aesthetics and imagination, and on the other hand, they symbolize the pullers' social (agonized) experience, economic plight, cultural sensitivities, religious mentalities, ritual festivities and above all, their deep, psychological reactions. From this perspective, this art is as real, significant and valid as any art of the world and deserves more academic and critical recognition.

## Conclusion

The exploration of selected rickshaw paintings in Chattogram, Bangladesh, discloses a rich range of cultural, historical, and personal narratives that surpass mere aesthetic appeal. These colorful artworks, ornamenting the city capture the essence of Bangladeshi identity, heritage, and daily life, offering a unique lens through which one can understand the nation's diverse cultural fabric. The thematic analysis presented in this study highlights the multidimensional nature of rickshaw art, accentuating its significance as both a cultural artifact and a medium of expression for the artists and rickshaw pullers.

The integration of national symbols and insignias in rickshaw paintings serves as a powerful reminder of Bangladesh's rich culture and the enduring spirit of its people. Through depictions of the Liberation War, national bird, martyr monuments, and the Bangladeshi flag, these artworks honor the sacrifices of the past and promote a sense of national pride and unity. Similarly, the portrayal of rural landscapes and daily activities evokes a nostalgic connection to the pastoral life left behind by many urban migrants, illustrating the deep-rooted ties to their ancestral heritage.

Floral motifs and traditional patterns in rickshaw paintings not only enhance their aesthetic appeal but also reflect the cultural significance of flora in Bangladeshi society.

The visual elements associated with flowers celebrate the natural beauty of Bangladesh and its botanical richness, nurturing a profound appreciation for the country's ecological multiplicity.

Religious symbols and narratives further enrich the context of rickshaw paintings, highlighting the spiritual dimensions of Bangladeshi culture. The inclusion of Islamic and Hindu motifs underlines the religious plurality of the nation, endorsing a message of coexistence and harmony. Additionally, the depiction of personal stories and struggles offers a moving glimpse into the lives of rickshaw pullers, calling attention to their otherwise unacknowledged struggle and aspirations amidst socio-economic challenges. Through these personal narratives, rickshaw art becomes a medium for identity expression and cultural preservation, ensuring that the voices and experiences of these individuals are, first of all, heard, then remembered and valued justly.

In conclusion, rickshaw paintings in Chattogram encompass a lively combination of cultural, historical, and personal elements, making them a significant aspect of Bangladesh's artistic heritage. These artworks not only beautify the urban landscape but also serve as weighty expressions of identity, resilience, and cultural continuity. By examining the themes and symbols of selected rickshaw art, this study highlights the importance of preserving and appreciating this unique form of cultural expression, which continues to resonate with the heart and soul of Bangladesh and its people.

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