

Discovery of a Sleeping Beauty – A Creative Nonfiction Piece



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Fall 2022

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A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of English and Humanities
University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
MA in English Literature and Creative Writing

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Fall 2022

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kaiser Haq', is displayed within a light gray rectangular box.

Professor Dr. Kaiser Haq

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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

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to Kaiser Haq, I owe so much to whose insights

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge everyone, living or dead, who is continuously inspiring me to write in this godforsaken world. I would like to sincerely thank my wonderful teachers at ULAB who have given me the confidence to write in English though this is not the language of my dreams. No matter how many mistakes I made, they were always there to help me by critically appreciating my work. I would like to thank the person with whom I have shared my life. Without her support, it would not be possible for me to finish this write-up. As the first reader of all my pieces, she helps me with her constructive feedback all the time.

And I would like to specially thank Professor Dr. Kaiser Haq for supervising me in the process of writing this piece. Without the conversations I had with him, it would not be possible for me dare a lot of things I dared in this whole process. Thank you, Sir, for just being there.

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Introduction

The most precise definition of creative nonfiction I have come across so far is written on the tagline of the *Creative Nonfiction* magazine, which is “True stories, well told.” This definition tells us that the writers who pursue this genre do not simply tell stories that are true, but they tell it nicely. They do not serve the stories by omitting their part in them. Rather they collect the ingredients of their stories, which are the human experiences, and then, they cook them inside their mind. While cooking, they do not forget to remain loyal to the ingredients, and therefore, when they serve them, they serve them with as little but delicate seasonings as possible so that the taste of the original ingredients does not fade away, and at the same time, they do not taste dull.

In all the domains of creative writing the ingredients are always the human experiences. But they are dealt differently in different genres. For instance, in poetry, most of the times poets aspire to transcend from the mundane experiences. As a result, the final dish they present sometimes seems too complex to savor by the general readers. In fiction, writers decompose human experiences, and in the final presentation, the ingredients get mixed up so chaotically from where it often takes a trained person to find out broken pieces of realities from that mixture. But in creative nonfiction the reality remains intact and the imagination must make its way into the write-up by not altering the real experiences. Therefore, unlike poetry and fiction, in creative nonfiction the author cannot be dead.

Remaining alive is always challenging nowadays, and therefore, pursuing nonfiction as a form of creative writing has been a challenging task for me. However, as it goes with all the challenges took by all human beings, it has been an exciting journey for me to explore the world

of creative nonfiction. In my native language, Bangla, I used to write poetry. Poetry came very naturally to me in Bangla. But when I started writing in English (other than the course assignments), I felt I did not know enough of this language, especially to claim as much command as to write poetry in it. But I wanted to write in English – both for the reasons everyone says these days and for the reasons I feel inside my heart. I wanted to write in English because I know the political strength of the language. I want to get heard, and I know how influential something written in English can be, even in the context of Bangladesh. And I know the strength of English language – how the language can feel at home in anyone's heart anywhere in the world. And, I wanted to write, because, I am fortunate to become aware that I have been living in this world for quite some time.

When came the time to decide my topic for my dissertation, I thought I should pick something which would give me the pleasure of exploring myself to a significant extent. So, I decided to write on my relationship with the city of Dhaka.

In the beginning of the preparation stage, I just gave myself some time to think what I have experienced in Dhaka and with Dhaka so far. I was not born in Dhaka, and I do not have any permanent home in the city. Therefore, ever since I came to Dhaka, I have been living a nomadic life. Every time I changed my residence in this city, I felt sad. At the same time, I also felt happy for the new place I had been moving into. In the beginning, my recollections boosted my imaginations which prepared me to approach the literature, fictitious or nonfiction, written on Dhaka, with a personal perspective.

So, I began reading. At first, I scanned through and sometimes read closely the books written on the history of Dhaka. Muntasir Mamoon, the renowned historian, has written plenty of

books on the city. I could not get all of them of course, but after scanning and skimming some of them, especially his *DhakarKotha*, I have got an overarching idea how Dhaka looked like over the different historical eras. The city was first built on the side of the River Buriganga near its Sadarghat part and then gradually expanded northwards. It enthralled me when I first realized the extent the city has expanded over time. Only the rivers surrounding the area had limited the growth to some extent, otherwise the city could have been grown much more. Thanks to the constructions of the bridges, the city is now growing in every direction without any limit.

I also read *The Book of Dhaka*, which is a collection of ten short stories translated from Bangla into English. The back-cover of the book says,

Dhaka may be one of the most densely populated cities in the world—noisy, grid-locked, short on public amenities, and blighting with sprawling slums—but, as these stories show, it is also one of the most colourful and chaotically joyful places you could possibly call home.

This sentence tried to summarize the experience of living in Dhaka except I could not agree with the last part of it. To be honest, the stories compiled in this book seemed ancient to me, they did not remind me of a city which I could call home. And this feeling led me to having an epiphany. I discovered how fast the city and the general experience of living in it change. I understood the pace of the growth of the city when I researched a bit about the famous eateries in the city. There was a list I found on the internet where someone was suggesting the best places in Dhaka to enjoy traditional dishes, and I was astonished to see that I cannot relate to that list though it was given only five years ago in 2017.

To get inspired by other nonfiction writers who dealt with Dhaka, I specially read two books. One is *Dhaka Puran* by Mizanur Rahman and *Jindabahr* by Poritosh Sen. In these two books, the writers recollected their memories of Dhaka from their younger days. The writers remembered how people had a strong community feeling in this city, and how a vibrant culture was thriving inside the city. I, and like me many (probably the majority) of the Dhaka residents, do not feel that sense of community in the city. Therefore, these books also failed to guide me to my voice in which I wanted to write my experiences on Dhaka.

Therefore, in the beginning of the writing process, I was terribly stuck. I could not write a single word for two weeks. And after two weeks when I could manage to put some words together, I did not feel any strength in them. So, I stopped putting those words together and waited for a couple of weeks more. As the deadline approached nearer, my brain did not have any more time to talk myself down and keep myself away from the writing process. One day I become desperate and started writing whatever came to my mind. I started jotting down all my memories and observations and continuously edit them back and forth. Finally, at some point, I felt that I have now written something sharable at least with my fellow citizens.

In his book, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, Theodore A. Rees Cheney pointed out two distinct styles that can be followed in a creative nonfiction piece. One of the styles is the dramatic style and other one is the summary style. The way I wrote my piece is in summary style. I had some stories in my mind which I could have been told in dramatic fashion with dialogues. But I did not take the risk for the fear that it would not be possible for me to translate the words uttered by the Dhaka residents with all their original implications in my piece. For instance, when Dhaka was not an unpleasant city for the walkers, I used to meet these people standing in front of the restaurants calling people who are walking down the streets to eat. They

had a very inviting voice which sometimes made me wonder that I might not need to pay the bill after eating whatever delicious food they have. Every time I heard them, I felt sad for the deception underlying that call. But I never had enough word to portray that feeling.

As far as I am concerned, I have been true to my memories, feeling, and emotions throughout the piece I wrote. I did not make up anything, and if I am not sure about some of my memories, I did not present them in my piece. And I did not simply want to tell the stories I experienced and I encountered, I also wanted to analyze them so that at least I can understand their complications. The summary method helped me to do that because in this method the focus is not in telling the stories in a compelling manner but trying to make the stories compelling by analyzing them side by side.

One thing I always wanted to understand about contemporary Dhaka is how the city's socio-economic structure is functioning. The most rewarding experience I had while writing this piece was that I probably managed to demystify some of my confusions about the social and economic class stratification in Dhaka. I always had a feeling that the people living in Dhaka cannot be classified in traditional Marxist criteria. The proletariat of this city, who do not have anything but their bodies to earn their livings, are dispersed around different social classes. Even someone living in a fancy apartment can be considered a proletariat as many of the times that person does not truly own anything but their bodies. In my piece, I tried to explore this issue to some extent.

In my piece, I also tried to explore the diverse stories the people of Dhaka producing every day. I admit that my observations are fairly limited in this domain, but even I could feel the magnanimity of the volume of these stories. They are just lying around us, but we the writers are

most of the time failing them by not telling them. It could be the ideological covers we have over our eyes, or it could be our idea about what is a great story. I do not know why the stories of the young girls and boys lying around the city footpaths in broad daylight are not piquing ours', the writers' interest. A city which is swarmed up by the continuous influx of the climate and many other types of internal refugees should be sad for its stories not being told.

The title of my piece is generated from this feeling.

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Discovery of a Sleeping Beauty

“In the year Two Thousand and Twenty-One

We will bring revolution”

This is one of the slogans I was inspired by in 2011 when I came to Dhaka to attend a long march to prevent the excavation of Boropukuria Coal Mine. At that time, I was a member of the Socialist Party of Bangladesh. The long march was organized by the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power, and Ports. My Party was one of the members of that committee.

I came with a bus full of people from Khagrachari. We started our journey at night and we were told that we would gather on Polton Maidan in the morning. As a young political activist, I had a great fascination about Polton Maidan as people made history many times in Bangladesh by gathering on this place.

In the morning when we reached the place where everyone gathered, I became a little disappointed. In my imagination, I saw the Maidan as a vast field where thousands of people could gather. But the place our assembly that morning took place was by the side of the public toilets on the Zero Mile at Gulistan. It was not the Polton Maidan. Back then I did not know that. I thought how come thousands of people gathered on a small place like this and made history. Later, I got to know that the historic Polton Maidan is no longer open for any sort of political gatherings. I should mention here for the clarification that BNP leaders sometimes love to call

the avenue in front of their Party Office as Polton Maidan though it is not. The Maidan is situated by the side of Bangabandhu National Stadium in Gulistan.

Nonetheless, the year 2021 has already gone, and the party I was engaged with at that time has split three times. I do not know which year they dream of bringing revolution now. However, whether the revolution was brought into this country by 2021 or not, the country had gone through tremendous changes in the last eleven years. There is no way to deny that. Everyone knows about the changes brought by the state-sponsored digital transformation. But, sadly, the changes in people's lifestyle, thought-process, the way they talk are little discussed.

Coming on the long march was not my first time in Dhaka. I cannot remember the exact year, but it is not earlier than 2006. Because by then both my paternal and maternal uncles have settled in Dhaka. And I remember one of the things my chotomamasaid when we were in Dhaka. He was once involved with a BNP leaning Islamic political party. He was saying how terribly BNP had been robbing the country. I was quite astonished by hearing that comment back then because I thought chotomamawas a diehard supporter of the BNP government. Him criticizing them was unexpected.

By remembering that comment I figured out that my first time in Dhaka woulddefinitely beduring the BNP government of 2001-2006.

Old days always feel great, and, in my memory, Dhaka was a beautiful city back then. Less chaotic and more alive. Flyovers were under construction but no mega projects compared to the scale of the metro rail were going on at that time. People seemed more confident and less confused. They seemed to know what they wanted from life. I am not sure that whether it was

my teenager-like naivety but I think I felt the people living in Dhaka back then knew the ways of the urban world. Everyone seemed respectful about other people's personal space. Now I regularly encounter people who are, god knows why, very interested to examine even what am I writing on my phone by literally poking their nose over my shoulder.

It was discernible from my appearance at that time that I was a high-school student. I can remember how compassionately people treated me when I encountered them on Dhaka streets. When I roamed around the city, I felt the power I possessed as a student. No bus conductor argued about giving me the half pass. No rickshaw-puller, no tea-stall owner, no street hawker talked to me in a rude way. Everyone was less angry back then. They all talked very calmly and I did not feel any argument taking place anywhere without any reason.

Nowadays, the moment I go outside I feel how angry and irritated the people are.

Things changed in Dhaka very fast. Mega projects were inaugurated in the city, the bus-conductors lost their calm, the rickshaw-pullers became indifferent to everything, all the public amenity services are on their breaking points. Now it feels that the life in Dhaka is always on the edge.

Resilience is a buzzword now. Living in Dhaka requires a great deal of resilience towards uncalled for and unwanted behaviors of the fellow citizens.

Oh, the concept of citizenship! I wonder, Is there any such thing in Dhaka? Do the people living in Dhaka feel that they are citizens of the city?

Some days ago, I heard something that seemed very funny to me, if not absurd. I use the public transportations every day and I know how tiring it can be when someone has to use them frequently. The drivers and the conductors of the buses have acquired the rudest and the most desperate personality possible. I cannot remember when is the last time I rode a bus fit for running on the streets. However, the thing I heard is that the cultural elites of Dhaka, most of who do not have to ride the city buses, have demanded for the withdrawal of these fitness-less vehicles from the streets. Of course, I agree with this demand, as every day I have to suffer from these demons. But the cultural elites of Dhaka did not demand for the withdrawal of these buses because they thought people are suffering, but their demand was based on the ground that these buses are hampering the aesthetic quality of the city. In order to make the city more beautiful, these buses must be taken away from the streets of Dhaka.

What a sense of citizen consciousness and what a sense of beauty!

I was, in fact, riding a bus while I came across this statement from the cultural elites. And I thought: Is it inevitable for anyone to become disconnected with the city when they are living in it?

After living in Dhaka for more than a decade now, I think I can speak for myself. I sometimes feel astonished to see that I am not a person who can feel the city is home. I feel sad when I think about it. Every day I feel an increasing disconnection with my surroundings, and no matter how much I try, there will be more and more things that will overwhelm my senses with numerous kinds of insecurities and ultimately shatter my existence.

Ever since I came to Dhaka, I have been seeing that the city is under construction. I lived in different parts of the city and I cannot remember any place where my sleep at night was not disrupted by the sound of unloading construction materials. If I am to visit a place after at most one year, there is a very good chance that I would not recognize it anymore, as many of the landmarks I probably remembered had been transformed into something else. I cannot also remember a place I lived in of which the main gate to the area was not filled with the infamous scent of Dhaka reeking from the open dustbins.

I have a very interesting memory regarding this scent of Dhaka. When I was first entering the city, (I have already admitted that I cannot remember the exact year right now, but I can clearly recall this memory) I got a distinct smell. It was a strong smell. I came from the Chottogram Hill Tract's forests – so what did my nostrils know! I could not associate that smell with anything familiar and I thought this is probably the way a city smells. My idea about the smell of the city got even stronger when I got the same smell when I was entering the residential area my paternal uncle was residing in at that time. It was only some years later when I started living in Dhaka and began to explore the city. Then I realized that the smell was of rotten vegetables just piled up on the streets and all the entrances of Dhaka and even most of the residential areas of Dhaka are blessed with that smell.

I now know that Dhaka has many other smells as well. If you go to the rivers or any other water bodies surrounding or inside Dhaka, you will know how a half-dead (or should I say undead?) city smells. There are some parts of the river Buriganga where water has transformed into something else in which no living organism can survive. And if you ride a bus and you are stuck in the great Bijoy Sarani traffic jam, you will know all the shades of smells human bodies

can reek. One of my colleagues once shared an experience regarding one of his regular journeys through that road. He was riding a BRTC bus. He could not manage to get a seat. So, he had to hold the rod stuck to the roof of the bus to keep his balance, and after sometime someone brought out a body spray and sprayed it on his armpits. I got to know the incident because he posted the experience on Facebook.

It is not that Dhaka does not have places that smells good. There are places in Dhaka where you can smell the heavenly scent of Hasna Henna. I had a Hasna Henna plant by the side of my window when I was in Khagrachari. I still have no language to express my feelings I experienced when that scent got mixed with the moonlight during the nights of full moon. When I got admitted at ULAB to study English literature, the memory of savoring this mixture made me to close my eyes for some seconds when I first encountered those lines from John Keats: “Heard melodies are sweet/ But those unheard are sweeter.” Now, when I get that scent in Dhaka, I sing to myself one of my favorite lines from Rabindranath Tagore: *“Tomargondhoamarkontheamarhridoyteneane”* (Your scent brings my heart to my tongue).

It is not every good smell brings my heart to my tongue, but there are other good smells as well. For instance, the scent of Biriyani. It is interesting that the Dhaka’s popular food list changes continuously. You may not find most of the things that were favorite to people even five years ago on the list now, but you will always find Biriyani on that list. When I came to Dhaka, I heard of Haji’s Biriyani and Fakhruddin Biriyani the most. But now I think most people now love the Biriyani served at Sultan’s Dine. If you go to Sultan’s Dine on the peak hours, you may have to wait for half an hour to get a seat there. But when you will get the dish full of Biriyani in front of you, I can guarantee you that you will forget everything.

Other than these brand Houses, you may also find great Biriyanis in the ordinary Biriyanis Houses while walking through the streets of the Old Dhaka, a place filled with history, mystery, and wonders. There is this famous traditional medicine factory in the Old Dhaka, Sadhana Ousudhalay. If you walk by that factory, you will get the great smell of all the cures of all diseases. If you go to Bangla Bazar, the famous wholesale book market of Dhaka, you will get the smell of all the ailing that will be caused by the tasteless knowledge printed on low quality paper spread around the country. If you go to the hospitals of Dhaka, you will get the smell of pure rest, that kind of smells like bleaching powder. And if you go to the so-called Asia-famous shopping malls in Dhaka city, you will get the smell of heaven that kind of smells like sweet corn prepared with mayonnaise. This sometimes get mixed up with strong air fresheners and makes me to remember one of the most horrifying memories of smell in Dhaka. In 2013, when the Rana Plaza in Savar collapsed and more than a thousand people died, I went there most of the days as a volunteering political activist. I remember how hundreds of rotten dead bodies smell like and how it smells when the smell of the rotten dead bodies gets mixed up with strong air freshener.

Walking had been one of the means by which I could encounter all those great wonders for my olfactory organ. But since the city is now heavily under-construction, it has become very unpleasant and unsafe for someone to walk on the city streets.

Despite this fact, I cannot deny that I am very fond of walking. The picture of the city I have in my mind is mostly a collage of what I have seen and sensed while walking. When I lived in Khagrachari, I walked miles after miles just for the sake of it. There I walked through the trails of heavenly beauty: the hills, the trees, the birds, the breeze, the falls, and most importantly, the

space! When I first came to Dhaka, it was one of my greatest pastimes to walk through the streets and observing the city life. I did not expect the same things from the city as I had in Khagrachari, but it was and still is one of my coping mechanisms to deal with the city. Though I terribly miss that “space” in this city.

When I walk on the city streets, I do not only smell things, I also see things. Most of these things make me feel guilty about my existence. Because I have no power to do anything to change the situation. I see people sleeping on the streets no matter how much the sun is shining on them or how many private-cars and buses and motor-cycles are honking right on their ears. I see people begging everywhere. Some of them are deformed in a way that it is very easy to understand how people with terrible intentions made them to look so. I once saw a person on whom someone probably poured a bucket of acid. Most of his face and one part of his body were terribly burned. I also see people whose eyes are plucked away, whose hands are cut down, who are suffering from terrible wounds on their legs, who are carrying deformed children on their laps, and sometimes, who are just acting that they have some abnormal body structure.

It might seem absurd but sometimes I also see things that are beautiful. In Dhaka, there are many trees. When I walk down the streets, I see many of them are full of colorful flowers. My heart fills with great joy when I see them glittering as the sun pours light on them. I feel happy when I see homeless people and dogs sleeping under them, at least they are not sleeping on the sunny footpaths. I feel happy when I see young couples are sitting under them, some of whom are dreaming of their wonderful future together. I remember the old days when the girl I loved and I also sat under those trees and saw wonderful things. It is hard to imagine birds like green parakeet and small blue kingfishers can be seen other the cages kept on the verandas of the

privileged people in Dhaka. We were lucky to see them numerous times while spent our dream-filled moments at Dhanmondi Lake.

Walking has given me the chance to see the city from different perspectives. I walked on Dhaka streets at different parts of the day and night. I know how the look and the feel of the city change every hour. It feels like in every hour the rulers of the city change. In the morning until the sun is just about to rise, the city is ruled by the prostitutes and snatchers hunting down the unaided people who seem naïve. I was actually forced twice in two different situations to walk on Dhaka streets during that ungodly hour, and I saw how people are falling into the traps of the prostitutes and the snatchers. The prostitutes of that hour usually offer a very low price and the snatchers act like they are lost in the city and want some help from the people they target. But if you just stop there just to listen to their story or with any other intention, they will rob you. Sometimes, these prostitutes and the snatchers are ganged-up and I also heard that some of them identify themselves as husbands and wives. I kind of sensed how these gangs work, so when I had to face these people, I acted like an expert of the city and walked with a kind of confidence that only a person leading a larger gang can have. No one said I am a good actor, and I have no intention to build a career in the acting industry, but I think these two times I did very good with my acting skills.

Speaking of the nights of Dhaka, I must admit one thing I miss the most here, which I took for granted in Khagrachari. It is the night sky full of stars. Whenever I visit Khagrachari now and look at the night sky, I realize how much I miss those stars. I think most of the people who came to Dhaka from the rural parts of the country miss that. “*Kotodinakaashdekhina*” (How

many days I did not look at the sky!) is one of the sentences I heard from most of my friends who miss their rural roots.

I also miss fireflies. But they are now rare in the rural parts of the country as well. All the bright electric lights have scared them away to the places where electricity has not reached yet. And should I mention that I also miss the serenity and the quietness of which I was used to while living in Khagrachari? How absurd that sounds now! Who expects quietness and serenity in a city!

Then what should someone expect from a city? That a city should remain awake 24/7, right? Because people are coming and going to and from the city for different important reasons all the time and people are facing different problems some of which are life threatening and should be solved immediately, right? But nowadays, Dhaka has become a lazy city that becomes sleepy right after 10 PM. Many of the public transportation companies stop running their buses after 10 PM. Many of the hospitals in Dhaka close their doors for patients after 10 PM. And after 10 PM there is no police on the streets which make it very easy for their contestants to take over the city.

But no matter how weird a city Dhaka is, people have no other way than coming here. If people living on the outskirts of the country where the tails of the system lie, their heads reside in Dhaka and they must come to satisfy their heads time to time. And they must also come to this city for earning more money. Most of the people doing menial works in this city came here because they did not get any good option to earn as much money they earn here which is necessary for providing their families.

Dhaka is a city that has two mobility pathways. By one pathway, people leave Dhaka for living in better cities of the economically better countries. In another pathway, people come to Dhaka from the other parts of the country for better opportunities. Some people also return to Dhaka after exploring the so-called better cities of the better countries, and some people also leave Dhaka for living in other parts of the country. The reasons might be different for each different person coming and going to and from Dhaka. It is impossible to imagine all of them. Some people might have come to Dhaka because they have lost their homes as the mighty rivers flowing through the country have washed away their homes. Some people might have come to Dhaka simply because they wanted to visit the capital of the country. Some people come to get education and some others even to a pilgrimage. Dhaka has many shrines, mosques and temples which are attractive to the people of different beliefs.

But by the reality that every day the population of Dhaka is increasing since it has become the capital of a newly independent country, we can understand that the rate of people leaving Dhaka is significantly lower than the rate of people coming to Dhaka.

This continuously increasing population of the city is one of the reasons why the city is never prepared for serving all her dwellers with all the amenities they expect she would provide them with. It is not that she does not try. She is always trying to welcome everyone. This is one of her greatest virtues. She does not know how to say no to anyone who wants of come to roam around and extract opportunities from her veins. Speaking of veins, once she had many rivers and canals and many other type of water bodies inside her, and now she has only a few, most of which are filled with a kind of liquid where no life form can survive, shows how exhausted she might feel to contain all of us. People still go and sit by the sides of these decaying water bodies

to seek some solace and by doing so what they mostly get is the dengue fever which is an endemic in Dhaka for several years now.

But is sitting by the side of the waterbodies the main source of entertainment of Dhaka dwellers? I do not think so. I think the main entertainment of the people living in Dhaka is staring at others.

I feel it every time I go outside. When I walk on the streets, I feel people are looking at me. They look at my dress, notice whether it is ironed or not, whether it is appropriate to the so-called Bangladeshi culture or is it season-specific or not, whether the color and type of one part of the dress is matched with the other parts, whether my shoes are appropriately matched with my dress, they notice my hairstyle, my gait and everything. The way I am describing it, someone might legitimately feel that all these things are inside my head. People do not usually pay that much attention to other people. But no. I would like to disagree. Because I also watch people. And when I watch people who are not watching me, I see how they are watching others. My long-term observation of people has guided me to reach to this conclusion that watching people is one of the most popular form of entertainments in Dhaka.

Watching people does not remain a form of entertainment when it has some perverted intentions ingrained. I feel the stares of the people doubling up when I go outside with a female companion. It is like a pathological condition of Dhaka's men that they cannot restrict themselves from gazing at the women in a distinct pattern. No matter what a woman is wearing, the Dhaka men are there to measure their body parts and think how shameless these women are who come outside with all those body parts. Their eyes say it all. Most Dhaka men do it in a way it feels they are trained to do so. When I go outside with Swarna, my wife, and Marzan, my

sister, I feel how traumatizing it is for a woman to just walk on the streets of Dhaka. Moreover, they have to endure many kinds of other verbal and physical sexual assaults and abuses by strangers and the familiars everywhere. As someone who identifies himself as a man and who fortunately has a male body structure, it is quite impossible for me to understand the depth of these traumas.

But perverted starers apart, I have observed that many people just watch others without any ill intentions. They usually look at the people's faces as if they are meditating. They get happy when they see a happy face and they get sad when they see a sad face. I feel delighted when I see these observers. These times remind me of a poem written by Birendra Chattopadhyay which is titled "Manush" (Humans). If I try to interpret the poem into English it says how wonderful human beings are! Might be their houses are burned down, might be their hearts are washed away, but still, they look at the beautiful faces of other people and appreciate their beauty.

But if we try to examine the issue of Dhaka people staring at others in a more structured pattern and ask, "Why are they fond of watching others that closely?" I think we will get three main reasons.

First reason would be the multicultural nature of the city. It is a city swarming with elements brought into and borrowed from many cultures. It is possible to find that people are wearing clothes irrespective of genders which are characteristic to nearly all major cultures of the world. This happens probably because Dhaka is a city where people from different parts of the world came and ruled a kingdom or at least a territory for at least last two thousand years. Though nowadays travelers from foreign countries are a rare site in the city, the city could not

forget its glorious past. Though people now are not actually quite conscious about what cultural elements they are carrying on their appearances, for their differences in looks everyone seems interesting to everyone.

Second reason would be the lack of interesting subjects to concentrate on. Without people it is hard to find anything in this city to look at and get prompts for thought. When someone is idle and they have nothing worthy of doing, they watch others. It is a great source of learning as well. Dhaka is not a place for people who are not people-smart of any sort. So, when someone gets to observe others closely s/he becomes an expert about how different people behave and function in different situations. Therefore, to spend their idle times and learn new things people watch people and keep their minds working.

Third, all the people walking on the streets are strangers, and the probability is very low that one would react if another person is watching them and judging them. Even if someone reacts, it matters little. Because the probability of meeting that same person is nearly zero. Therefore, people feel safe to watch others even if that act of watching sometimes crosses some boundaries.

People in Dhaka have a very interesting sense of boundary. You would never know what they might define as boundary crossing. One day I was in a bus and I heard a man threatening the bus-conductor that he would behead him if the conductor does not agree to take the fare he is offering. Nobody did mind after the utterance of such a grave threat. I do not know what stunned everyone. Was it the elegance the man uttered his threat with made everyone feel he might have the power to do so? Is that why nobody said anything in response? I do not know the answer,

but it felt very strange to me. Because every day I also see people are engaging in fights for many silly and simple causes.

I can share another incident regarding boundary crossing. That day I was riding a rickshaw. The rickshaw-puller was young and he was quite a skilled driver. On the street, two people were fighting. One party was a CNG driver and another party was probably a passenger or some passer-by. The moment my rickshaw-puller noticed the fight, very casually he brought the rickshaw there, stood between the two parties fighting, took some of their blows in his body, broke the fight apart and gleefully came to the rickshaw again. How elegantly he did that! What inspired him to do so? He did not know why those people were fighting, he did not know those people, and he had a very little chance to meet them again. I wondered how smoothly my rickshaw-puller handled the situation by crossing so many boundaries.

There are even stranger incidents that take place on the many folds of Dhaka. Many of them I see taking place on the public places. I talked about how unsafe Dhaka can be in the early morning. But some people may find Dhaka unsafe at other times as well. Regularly people are dying on Dhaka streets by getting hit by reckless buses. Regularly people are being robbed and even killed. It happens in open daylight at some specific places of Dhaka. And if someone is concerned about pollution, the air, the water, the sound, the light – Dhaka is polluted in every way imaginable.

The other day Swarna and I were at my dentist's and we were discussing about Delhi and the prospect of traveling the city. Swarna is the person for whom and with whom I walked and still am walking on the streets of Dhaka. At the dentists' we were talking about how unsafe the city of Delhi can be. But gradually we understood we were talking about Delhi while we had

been sitting in Dhaka. We laughed our hearts out, as for a Dhaka-dweller, no place in the world and possibly outside the world should be unsafe. The people who are being trained to go to Mars should learn to survive on the Dhaka streets. Or even better, the people who are surviving in the Dhaka streets can be directly sent to Mars.

Ahh, the strange city of Dhaka! Every day that gets even stranger. Strangers are always coming to the city, and, in moments, familiar people do not hesitate to act like they are strangers. Strange things take place every day on the city streets and behind the closed doors of the apartments. It is a city where strangers are ruling the strangers by setting up strange rules and trying to implement them in strange ways which people usually defy in many strange manners. It is a city where living requires a great deal of creativity and innovation. It is a city where despite an unlivable environment characterized by every kind of pollutions, despite an extraordinary chaos, people are making their way to live a life. How strange is that!

And strange is the word “people” here. I would never have known how heavy with meaning a word can be, if I did not think about the word “people” in relation to Dhaka. I feel that the word is semantically on the verge of explosion. It means so many things in so many contexts. From different perspectives the word may have completely different locus of references. It is possible that all the branches of knowledge can find enough evidence by observing the city-dwellers to come up with their own unique definition of the word. Medical science may define people as the city dwellers who are enough irresponsible regarding their health for which they die irrespectively in the ongoing series of simultaneous endemics. Political science may define people as a host of city-dwellers dead enough inside to be genuinely interested in the political matters that could incite them to ask the power the right and unsettling questions. Literature and

other humanities disciplines may define people of the city as a bunch of city-dwellers who successfully mastered the science and art of compromising with whatever their ethical standards are in every step yet managing to maintain a highly ethical impression of themselves. I tried to imagine in my own cynical way from the contexts of above three disciplines, but I am sure that all the disciplines would find the people of Dhaka as the most interesting subject for investigation. They are like diamonds, too many atoms pressed in a very little space allowing them to exist in a way where breaking them is the hardest thing to do.

What is the bonding agent among these diamond people? Obviously, the media. It is inevitable that the communication among these peoples is established by the organized media who work in the same way the organized religions work. Every day these media houses are defining the people and showing their lives on screen or in words, guiding their feelings about themselves. Most of the times the popular media, who are supposed to be the representatives of the people, act like they do not know who these people are. It feels that they have transcended to a stage from where people seem too small to be respected. Journalists standing on the other side of the camera often become the incarnation of ethics though it is popularly known that little journalistic ethics is in effect in the media at large. Even sometimes the people belonging to the media houses are confessional about that.

Ethics is an interesting topic to discuss in the context of Dhaka. Men here threaten women with rape if they do not comply with their version of an ethical dress code. Public servants here threaten people with endless hassle if they are not complying with the amount of bribe demanded. And many of them do it in between offering prayers to God. Here I am just mentioning the two obvious scenarios with which most of the people familiar with Dhaka life

should be able to relate. But it is not hard to find that all the relations in Dhaka city, whether it is inside the family or outside the family, whether it is economic or sexual in nature, there is a high chance that neither of the parties are complying with the ethical standards they formally subscribed to. Getting derailed from the moral grounds is normal evident everywhere, but interestingly most of the people is blaming others for the total ethical degeneration of the society.

Despite an all-out ethical degeneration, I must admit that Dhaka is a highly functional city. I think the secret behind this functionality is a planned and calculated scarcity everywhere. When people are in dire need of resources for fulfilling even the basic needs like healthcare, everything would seem ethical to avail that thing. This makes some people to become exploitative of situations who try to earn money by putting people in traps. You may find these people everywhere, especially outside all the government offices and government owned service-providers. From the public hospitals to the passport office, these people are everywhere. I cannot imagine how much shock a person needs to go through to do such things.

To make it clear what these people do, I think it would be good if I share one of my personal experiences.

Recently I tried to get my passport. I consider it a great fortune that I was born and raised in Bangladesh. So, it was only natural that I should get the passport of the country without any hassle. But who am I kidding! Some problem arose when I went to submit my application at the passport office. They were supposed to give me the solution to that problem. But instead of giving me a solution, the officials sent me to the people standing outside of the office, who are, in colloquial Bangla called *dalals*. The approximate translation of the word would be agent, but these agents are without any agencies and they are, hear this, illegal. There are several

signboards inside the passport office the words written on which are supposed to mean how wrong it is to go to the *dalals* and how punishable it is to trying to get a passport through them. At first, I became desperate because if I did not get my passport at that time, I would miss some of the great opportunities of my life. And if I choose to wait, I will have to wait for six months at least. So, I gave the *dalals* three thousand taka to solve my problem and the solution they gave is even more illegal which I could not pursue for my own moral limitations. I wondered after having this experience that what an incredible profession this *dalali* is! I thought if someone wants a truly lucrative career and wants financial security, I think that someone should train themselves in the vocation of *dalali*.

But fortunately, or unfortunately, not everyone is up for that. Not everyone is skilled to do this work as well.

Speaking of professions, there are thousands of them people identify with in this city. I think we can divide them in four categories: job, business, work, and freelancing. Let me explain.

The first and the most popular one is holding a job. People who have a graduate degree would primarily prefer a government job as this kind of jobs offer the most security. Jobs in banks, NGOs and multinational companies are also very popular as their salary structure is comparatively better. But these jobs are less secured than the government jobs. For this reason, there is a tendency that people resign from a comparatively high-paying non-government job to join a low-paying government job. But there are some companies that offer significantly high-paying jobs with a considerable sense of security than all the other jobs. If someone gets a job in such a company, that person wouldn't usually think of going anywhere else. And there are some

special-skill degrees, holders of which are supposed to earn more money than the others. Two such degrees are MBBS and the bachelor degree in any of the engineering subjects. The salary range of the job holders vary significantly. The minimum wage of the country is eight-thousand taka, and many people in Dhaka get this salary after working nearly two hundred hours a month. On the other hand, a bank MD in Bangladesh can earn up to two million taka per month. So, you can imagine the gap.

The second one is doing business. There are many types of businesses in this city. The person who sells cigarettes on streets considers him/herself a business-person and people who import and export billion-taka worth goods also consider themselves business-persons. It is hard to imagine how many types and kinds of businesses are there. The bottom line is, someone is a business-person if she/he buys things at a risk of making loss and sell them in pursuit of making profit. As Bangladesh is a capitalist country, doing business is very popular here. It gives a person a certain level of independence where from losing everything to making a great fortune, everything is possible.

The third one is engaging in menial work. These people are not usually job holders and they cannot be categorized as business-persons. They have some special skills and they earn money by selling those skills in the local markets. Like a person who knows how to pull a rickshaw can earn money by rickshaw-pulling. S/he can borrow a rickshaw in exchange of a fixed amount from the *mahajans*, the rickshaw-owners. S/he can also own a rickshaw and in that case the amount earned can be enjoyed by them if not goons take the money from them or the traffic police has fined them for whatever the reason is. Previously, the vocation of rickshaw-pulling was mainly pursued by men, but gradually women are also coming to this profession.

Not only the rickshaw-pulling but also many other specially-skilled people fall into this category. Many of them are independent and some of them are not. If a specially-skilled person like a mason gets under a contract with a real-estate company then the person kind of has a job. But these job contracts are usually short-term and with little job security.

The fourth one is freelancing. A freelancer is a person who also have some special skill but who usually never signs under a long-term contract. They deal with the clients to sell their skills in hourly or project basis. Many young people in Dhaka with different computer skills are now doing freelancing and some of them have become successful in their profession.

There are other types of professions as well like being a politician or cultural activist. But nowadays it is hard to find people who are devoted to full-time politics. Full-time cultural activists are also rare. There are also people who go out of the country and work for foreign companies. They send remittance which constitutes one of the pillars for economic stability in the country.

There is a profession most of the people of Bangladesh are engaged with but hardly seen in Dhaka city. The profession is farming. Though there are rooftop gardens in many of the buildings in Dhaka nowadays, but seldom these gardens are the source of income for the gardeners.

In this city, it is hard to understand which profession belongs to which economic and sometimes social class. A rickshaw-puller might earn more than a private or public job holder. A caretaker of a building might be richer than the people living in that building who owns properties in their rural homes. A fourth-class employee of a government office might own five

apartments in Dhaka when a first-class employee might find it hard to pay the bills according to the lifestyle. This scenario is incompatible with the classical stratification of economic classes in Bangladeshi context.

I sometimes talk to the rickshaw-pullers when I hire them. They usually come to the city from the rural parts of the country and they find it very easy to earn a good amount of money, enough to build a house and support a family in the village. Many people who work in Dhaka fall into this category. They usually do not come to Dhaka to live here. They come here for earning a livelihood and creating a safer future for them in their rural homes. But many of them also come to live here, and some of them come to take refuge inside the forest of people where it is nearly impossible to find someone if the exact location is not explicitly known. One day I met with a young rickshaw-puller who eloped to Dhaka with his lover. He usually works as an electrician and occasionally pulls rickshaw. He and many of the electricians in Dhaka I encountered are interestingly self-taught though there are numerous institutions that train people in vocations like this. What is the use of the vocational institutions if they are not able to attract the people who are aspirants in different vocations?

The streets of Dhaka are a great equalizer. It is possible to find people from every profession and vocation on the streets. Every one, no matter from what social class the person is from, they are bound to share the same insecurities and safety concerns, if not the opportunities. Sometimes the concept of social class prevents people to avail the opportunities available on the streets. It is popularly discussed in Bangladesh that how many people are unemployed despite having graduate and post-graduate degrees. All these people think they belong to a certain social class which does not permit them to sell cigarettes on the streets or to become a sales person at a

shop. But there are also people who have declassed themselves and they are making more money than many of the entry-level jobs in Bangladesh by simply selling surgical masks on public buses.

Though distinctions among the economic classes of the lower portion of the society is falling apart, there are clearly defined social classes which can be identified by different class markers. Usually, these markers are imprinted on the clothes of the people. In Dhaka, it is not hard to tell who belongs to which social class by looking at what dress someone is wearing. The use of language also works as a class marker. The mode of transportations one is using, the places one prefers to eat, the places one prefers to go for recreation are also the distinct class markers.

But do the people from all these professions and classes belong to Dhaka? What creates the sense of belongingness here? Is it only a phenomenon for the people who have been in Dhaka for generations and can declare themselves as Dhakaiya? But these Dhakaiya people, by population, are a very small minority in this vast metropolis as most of the population of the city is constituted by the migrants.

So, the people who own at least an apartment in Dhaka can think of themselves as rooted in the city? The way the buildings are raised and the architectural pattern the buildings have do not say so.

The contemporary architecture of Dhaka reveals the way the apartment owners think. Most of these buildings are erected as if they are for one time use. They are not designed for living comfortably. Their interior or exterior, nothing of these buildings appeals to any of the

senses. Most of them are dark as they are encapsulated by other buildings and all the rooms of these buildings are very congested where sometimes even two people can find it hard to breath. So, the people who live in these apartments cannot love them in any way, and it is obvious that the people who own them do not love them either. These owners just wanted to own an apartment because the apartments in Dhaka work as great money machines. If they did have any intention to settle down in this city, they would have thought carefully about the places they are building here which are supposed to be dwelling places for people not pigeons.

What is Dhaka? Is it a city of mosques, as it was written on the textbooks when we were teenagers? It might be. As there are thousands of mosques in the city some of which are archaeological and many of which are modern. But not only mosques, Dhaka can be also called a city of educational institutions and hospitals. We can find hundreds of tertiary colleges, madrasas and universities, and thousands of hospitals in the city. People from all around the country are regularly coming to Dhaka to get education and get healthcare with a dream that it would make their lives easier. Whether these institutions and hospitals make their lives better or not is another story.

Or, is the city of Dhaka is a city of stories? It is a city where everyone has something interesting to tell. It is a city where everything has something interesting to tell. For instance, the wet marks passed through the parked buses on Mohammadpur Bus Stand tells the story of the lack of public toilets in the city. The piled-up travel bags and clothes on the corner of Bosila CNG station tell the stories of many people who were snatched, whose dreams were broken, some of whom were even hacked to death, who knows! The regular occurrence of dead bodies popping up on the river Buriganga tell the stories of how cheap the lives of the people are. When

some of these bodies are of some big university students or of a political leader, only that time these bodies become a matter. Otherwise, no one bothers about them.

If you go to the historic places like Sat Gombuj Mosque, you will hear other kind of stories. You will hear that only thirty years ago the river was not far away like it is now. It was by the side of the mosque. And if you ask people who built this mosque, they will tell you many interesting versions of the genesis of this mosque. Some of these versions might have djinns and angels in them. Nowadays djinns and angels are not something to be surprised in this city. People see the angel of death everywhere busy running from one place to another, and if they could encounter a djinn, they would become lucky. Because it would give them a very interesting subject to ponder.

And if you go to the University of Dhaka and nearby Suhrawardy Udyan, you will hear the stories of magnificent struggles the students of this university and the people of Bangladesh carried out from these places. If you go to the national museum not far from the university, you will see many people familiarizing their children with the things like rice-plant by saying, “*Dekho baba, eta holodhangach*” (Look beta, rice-plant). There you may also find equations like “Mashiur+Swarna” engraved on a historically significant wooden exhibit though touching those exhibits are strictly prohibited. What do these equations equal to? Do they equal to declaration of love or the cave-men like urge to let others know that they were here?

In this city everyone has many stories. If you ask a tea-stall owner, she will tell you many stories. If you ask a grocer, he will tell you many stories. If you ask a bus-conductor, he will tell you many stories. If you ask a traffic-police, he will tell you many stories. If you ask a prostitute, she will tell you many stories. If you ask a job-holder, he will tell you many stories. If you ask a

security guard at a shopping mall, she will tell you many stories. Even if you ask a bird in this city, it will also be able to tell you many stories. Everyone and everything, every living and the dead organisms in the city are like story banks. If only all these stories could be monetized, Dhaka would become a mountain of dollars.

But not every story matters to the system. The media sometimes pick up some of the stories randomly and then tells everyone that this is the ultimate story the city dwellers should immerse themselves in. By the domination of the media-generated and media-promoted stories, people often forget their own stories. But this act of forgetting is only deceitful. Forgetting the stories does not necessarily mean that the stories have been removed from the memory. They are only put down to sleep. If someone can just alter the gold and the silver sticks, these stories will awake.

I also have many stories to tell. Here I am just declaring that I have discovered the sleeping beauty.

Afterword

The piece I wrote here, though it is the longest piece I have ever written, does not represent everything I wanted to talk about Dhaka. Here, I have just touched on some issues which can be elaborated in multiple long or intensively written short pieces. For example, I have a plan to explore the psychopathology of Dhaka men. I have been observing them for quite some time, and I think I have some ideas to share with them (and me, as I am also a Dhaka man, for instance) which they might find fascinating to read. Mirror images are always fascinating, right? I also have a plan to explore the architectural chaos prevailing in Dhaka where buildings are just erected as if they are just for one time use. I am very annoyed by this thought process of the land/apartment owners or the developers in Dhaka. I also have a plan to explore the system in which the slums of Dhaka are functioning. I did not touch on this issue that much in this piece. I also have plans to elaborate on the social and economic class stratifications of the people living in Dhaka; cultural and political nature of the contemporary Dhaka residents who seemingly do not have any sense of citizenship; the evolution of the streets of Dhaka from political, structural, and criminological perspectives; the evolution of the middle-class of Dhaka who were used to be guided by the political movements led by the student organizations, and by the decline of the students' organizations whose voices have disappeared from the scene; and so on. There are many more issues I observe every day, which I think are worthy of representation. For example, the peculiarity of the caretakers of the Dhaka apartment complexes where the middle-class live. These caretakers are often very annoying and fond of bullying the residents of the apartments whose owners probably live abroad.

I admit I have a lot of spaces for improvements in my writing style. There are some issues I think I could have written in dramatic style by employing the techniques of character development and dialogues. I should also try the different subgenres of creative nonfiction that would give me more flexibility to represent my ideas. I also need to explore the different linguistic phenomena of English language, so that I can bend the rules of English grammar according to my needs, and so that I can initiate the dialogue between Bangla and English more efficiently which would give me more room for recreating and giving reference to the original scenes I encounter regularly.

However, I am happy that I have started writing.