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Ruptures in rural life in mid-20th-century Bengal: A magic realist reading of

Akhtaruzzaman Elias's *Khwabnama*

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Abstract:

In the context of contemporary Bangladesh, we see a significant political rupture and reemergence of dreams of radical political restructuring. A fresh reading of Akhtaruzzaman Elias's Khwabnama asserts this significance. Elias brings about the ruptures in rural life that are being harnessed out of the streaming undercurrents of history and adversities. The novel reflects a peasant community's resilience-building and assimilating dreams against the tides of oppression and capitalist exploitation. Through the presentation of a magic realist universe, Elias deconstructs the established binaries of reality and dreams, and the grand narrative of nation and the micronarratives. My paper aims to delve into the unique culture-specific world views of peasants as presented in the novel and underline their unique political and cultural ontologies that sustain their existential struggles through their specific modes of orientation to society, ecology, art, cultural syncretism, and faith worlds.

Introduction

Khwabnama (2021) is a palimpsest of historical alterity that commenced and continues to traverse the historical trajectory of the Indian subcontinent. In order to bring in the historical alterity, the novel portrays a microcosm of crises in human history where the historical events

that lead to and follow the partition of India are presented within a magic realist framework. *Khwabnama*, Elias's magnum opus and one of the greatest specimens of Bengali literature, is rich in historical significance, owing to the novel's capability to cut across all the ages of history and temporality. Notable Bengali novelist Maheshwata Devi reaffirms Elia's creative genius through her statement, as printed in the blurb of the translated version: "I would have considered myself blessed if I could have achieved a fraction of his quality in my writing." The novel's cultural significance lies in its elevation of rural life and mythologization of rural Bangladesh at an epic level that cognates with Gabriel Garcia Marquez's representation of Mocondo/Colombia in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Zayed). Arunava Sinha's translation of this novel in the year 2021, nevertheless, retains its significance, as it helps the readers visualize parallel strains of sociopolitical impediments that run across the frame of two chronologically distinct postcolonial situations. Withholding the fact that I read the original Bengali text of *Khwabnama*, I have chosen the English translation for this paper to facilitate the reference of a wider global readership. The English version preserves the original Bengali text's title. *Khwab* is an Urdu word that translates to 'dream', whereas *nama* is a Persian form of storytelling (*namah*) that is associated with epic narratives. Therefore, *Khwabnama* can be interpreted as a grand portrayal of a primitive universe where dreams and reality intersect and where various aspects of marginalized living are connected with the tumultuous history of colonial Bengal. My attempt stems from the necessity of portraying the importance of *Khwabnama* as a peasant novel based on the discourse of nation and national politics, etched with micronarratives and their grand portrayal with fine artistry interweaving society, adversity, history, and myth. This paper aims to analyse the translated text from the angle of magical realism, which Elias employs in his text to bring about the rupture of the historical closures and unlock the doors of historical reality, leading to an eruption of multiple possibilities (Massumi, 1987, p. 8).

Situating magic(al) realism from the global to the local:

Magic(al) realism developed out of a confrontation with the overt realist tradition and stimulated a projection of transgressing reason that evokes the extraordinary world of the unconscious, the repressed and the inexpressible uncanny. This movement induced Carpentier to diverge from existing approaches and led him towards the evocation of the "marvellous" as underlined by the surrealist (Wilson, 1995, pp. 68-70). Carpentier sensed that the European surrealists forced an unfruitful attempt to conjure up magic without the realization of the fact that the marvellous is always already inherent and deeply embedded in the "richness of reality" (Carpentier, p. 86). There is an underlying magical essence in the richness of Latin American

reality, which was previously detected, even before Carpentier, by the Spanish conqueror of Mexico, Hernando Cortes, in the 16th century, who, in his account, was unable to describe Latin America in familiar European terms (Bowers, 2004, p. 13). Magical realism is thus subjective to the reality of a cross-cultural system, and in the non-Western world, it has been a tool for “literary identity policies”. Faris traces magic(al) realism’s frequent association with the “literary identity policies”, and “encoding of alterity”, from which emerged the importance of magic(al) realism as a powerful tool of cultural decolonization (p. 36). Roberto González Echevarria divides magic(al) realism into two categories that can be traced in the evolution of magic(al) realist fiction – the ontological and epistemological. Ontological magic(al) realism is characterized by magical aspects that conform to the cultural belief systems of the locale in which the fiction is written. However, epistemological magic(al) realism was derived not from cultural traditions or beliefs but rather from the derived aspects of knowledge (Warnes, 2009, p. 13). Jeanne Delbaere developed an almost similar distinction, whereby she divided magic(al) realism into two categories: folkloric magic(al) realism (akin to Echevarria’s ontological magic(al) realism) and scholarly magic(al) realism (Faris, 2004, p. 27). In the book *Magic Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (2009), Christopher Warnes finds another overlapping distinction: faith-based magic realism and irreverence-based magic realism, where faith-based magic realism presents an alternative world of non-western, culture-specific belief systems (Warnes, 2009, pp. 13-14).

South Asian magical realism holds a significant place within the domain of the non-western magic realist tradition. However, the fact that realism is at the core of the term and that literary realism has rarely been conventional or homogenous – at least not in the South Asian context – is not given nearly as much attention. In contrast with the form’s historical association with the emergence of bourgeois capitalism in Europe, South Asian realism has a more nuanced origin story (Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 198). In its South Asian literary form, it emerges from a regional context that embodies possibilities, styles, and modes – stylistic features – often seen as deviations from realism or non-realist or anti-realist approaches. In the late-colonial South Asian novel, particularly at the intersection of anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist movements alongside the nationalist quest for “authentic” literary-political representation, realism emerges as a complex form characterized by binaries and paradoxes. This representation seeks to blend secularism, rationality, and logic – principles rooted in bourgeois capitalism – with customs, rituals, and beliefs (ibid., p. 199). In this context, we can refer to the magic(al) realist literary tradition in Bangladesh, produced in the Bengali language. While tracing the genealogy of magic(al) realism in Bangladeshi fiction, we come across certain

innovative works. For instance, *Chander Amabasya* (Moonless Night of the Moon, 1964) by Syed Waliullah diverged from the realist tradition, and it is through this pioneering work that Waliullah initiated a new epoch of magic(al) realist tradition in the literature of Bangladesh. Shahidul Zahir, one of the pioneers of the magic(al) realist tradition in Bangladesh, remarks on this novel, “On reading *Chander Amabasya*, I also felt that Syed Waliullah had read Latin American literature. He might have read the novels of Garcia Marquez too” (translation mine; cited in Rashid, p. 6). Coincidentally, Syed Waliullah had visited France at the time of Alejo Carpentier’s and Miguel Angel Asturias’s presence in France and their discovery of magic(al) realism in the paintings exhibited in the city of Paris. Possibly, the visit of Waliullah to France and his spending the concluding years of his life in one of the cultural nerve centres of Europe had a direct influence on his literary mode, which has been instrumental in his experimentations with magic(al) realism (Panda, 2019, p. 348). Shahidul Zahir, who, like Waliullah, had spent a few years abroad, was also influenced by the magic(al) realist aesthetics (ibid., p. 348). He had captured the violent fascism, sly politics, and the cannibalistic reality that Bangladesh had witnessed prior to its independence in 1971 in the texture of his magic(al) realist work *Jibon O Rajnoitik Bastabata* (Life and Political Reality, 1987; Panda, p. 340).

In Bangladesh, magical realism thrives due to the political crisis and the agricultural base of the population; here, capitalist modernity and rural cultural forms coexist and interact. With the rise of authoritarianism and social violence in South Asia, magical realism is evolving into more innovative and diverse expressions (Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 216). The magic(al) realist fiction of Bangladesh has always remained grounded in the complex political realities of the nation and its historical vicissitudes, of which *Khwabnama* (1996) is a representation.

The novel, set in the 1940s after the devastating Bengal famine that claimed over three million lives, tells the story of Muslim peasant and fishing communities exploited by Hindu and Muslim landlords and *jotedars*. The partition of India and the end of zamindari, influenced by the Muslim League’s agenda, which oddly supports both the Tebhaga peasants and landlords for its own interests, form the backdrop for the novel (Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 214). *Khwabnama* was written by Elias as the second book of a trilogy of historical novels (Mohaiemen, 2024, p. 545). A study of the author’s biography suggests that his background has influenced the text to some extent. For instance, his creativity stems from his profession as a lecturer of Bengali literature and an avid reader of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nikos Kazantzakis, D H Lawrence, and James Joyce (Munim, 2022, p. 1). He had a Marxist bent of thought, but he also had his own unique observation and ideological stance where he states: “I want to see the inside of reality... For that would be wishful thinking. Our Communist

writers all these days have indulged in this wishful thinking” (Dasgupta; Anjum). Rifat Munim also brings to attention Elias’s ideological stance and states that while many of his forebears and contemporaries wrote in the same Marxist tradition as the author, Elias breaks from the almost narrow rules and standards set forth by the Marxist critical discourses of his day. His writing does not support moral principles, middle-class feelings, or binary thinking (Munim). Hence, his representation of rural life is framed within a more innovative and flexible framework than might be allowed by a strictly Marxian or Gramscian ideological framework.

Dream, myth and spirits in the alternate universe of *Khwabnama*:

Showcasing class oppression, *Khwabnama* (1996) is a tour de force with its nuanced magic realist portrayal of the Partition of Bengal and the Tebhaga movement. As represented by Tamiz’s family in the novel, the poor, helpless, and oppressed peasant class invokes the dream and the dead spirits to counter the oppressive and powerful zamindars like Sarafat Mondal. The entire yield of crops earned through the poor labour of Tamiz’s blood, sweat, and tears, accompanied by the unbearable and burdensome *khajna* (tax), drained out into the repository of the plutocrat Sarafat. The art of magic realism, across continents, creatively constructed a counter reality in the face of the cannibalistic and the gruesome. Elias, too, in the novel embraces this art that enlivens Tamiz and his fellow villagers’ lifeless limbs that were drained of all strength and reawakens the dead voices that were choked in their dry throats, thus channelizing a passage of protest, which is unaffordable in their unarmed, helpless state of reality. Elias’s characters find respite in an altered world of dreams, and the construction of this parallel world is a recurring trope in magic realist fiction. In chronicling this dream, Elias employs several other elements of magical realism, such as myths, local legends, the dominance of dead spirits, dialogue with the dead, the presence of a parallel world of dreams, the revival of the dying tradition, etc. Set in the pre-Partition period, he finds and affords to utter the language of revolution under the shielding mantle of a dream. Through the dead spirits like that of Cherag Ali and local legends like Majnu Shah and Bhabani Pathak, he raises the war cry against historical setbacks laid upon the land by autocrats, such as the zamindari system and partition. Like Mocando’s unspoiled new world from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the opening of this novel, too, alludes to an almost prelapsarian Eden where nature and human habitation had a synchronous existence. Multiple myths are associated with this land. There is an allusion to the myth of the genesis of Katlahar Lake, which revolves around the livelihood of the people. It was then that an earthquake made the waters of Jomuna swell and spill into the Bangali river. The water, consequently, flooded the adjoining villages. It was then that Munshi

stretched his foot out from the fig tree to deliver a mighty kick to a small pond that used to exist here, transforming it into the huge Katlahar Lake (Elias, p. 60-61). These myths are, therefore, intricately associated with the fate of the land and the livelihood of its people. The curse of a Madari's leader, or *fakir*, probably a *pir* or a prophet, pronounced from the graveyard of the *fakirs* resulted in an earthquake – a catastrophic one, which transformed the creek into a river, around 50 or 60 years after the British conquest. Cherag Ali had never made it abundantly obvious what the curse was, why it had been given, or to whom it applied. When Kulsum asked, he would hum the verse:

A wild fury split the earth wide open
All the lakes and rivers were in turmoil ...
A majestic river had turned to mud
The fakir found his address close to the lake. (Elias, 2021, p. 30)

The othering of the cultural self and the intertwined nature of social and ecological issues affecting the culture:

The courses of river and history flow parallelly across the narrative. A string of hamlets that runs along the courses of meandering rivulets in *Khwabnama* presents a microcosm of a promising and fertile land that gradually gets eroded by unfolding calamities (Khatun, 2022, pp. 35-36), enables us to draw an analogy between the tropical ecology of Bangladesh and the late-20th-century societies fostering social adversities such as capitalism, conservatism, and destructive nationalism that may culminate in social disintegration. The eroding land is analogous to the possibility of historical alterity comprising the Gandhian ideal of “self-content villages” that crumbles before the advent of “‘modern civilization’ fashioning India on the model of Great Britain, Italy or Japan” (Parel, 1997, p. xxv). Elias uses the art of magical realism to describe the complex postcolonial situation in the novel. Homi Bhabha suggested that magical realism is “the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world” (Siskind 2011, p. 833). The art of magical realism that runs parallel to the aforementioned strain of historical rhythm reverberating across the narrativization of *Khwabnama* heightens the artistic importance of the novel. The intertwining of art and history, therefore, substantiates *Khwabnama* as a partition novel with an alternative mode of narrativization. The global readership of South Asian magical realism being limited to the national novels of Anglophone writers such as Salman Rushdie, *Khwabnama* emerges as an alternative paradigm of South Asian magical realism that addresses the micro-narratives of the third world that are grounded in local tradition, culture, myth, and belief system. The novel is not just grounded in local

tradition and essence; it also shows their interface with the foreign and the modern. The public being drawn to frenzy by the car is one such example:

Since the beginning of the war, cars had driven through the Golabari market at least five times over the past few years. ... No sooner had the wheels of the Ford started rolling with the manager and the doctor seated as passengers along with the Khan Bahadur than the energy of the spectators descended to their respective feet so that nearly half of them began to run behind the car. (Elias, 2021, p. 186)

The strangeness that irks out of an interface between tradition and modernity and the essence of the demise of the former “other” also finds reflection through the cinematographic lens of Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali* (1955), a part of the *Apu Trilogy*. In the film, Ray portrays a scene where siblings Apu and Durga are enthralled by the sight and sound of an approaching train – a symbol of modernity amidst the backdrop of a rustic landscape. However, a further reading of the cultural space reverses the reader’s notion of exotica, whereby *Khwabnama* establishes a South-Asian cultural alterity where the rural space of Bangladesh is presented unexoticized, providing a bent to the global reader’s confinement within the Eurocentric notion of the exotic. Exotic, in the words of Graham Huggan, can be described as “a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity” (Huggan, 2001, p. 13). The indigenous habits and world views presented through the novel construct an ambience that decentres the urban space from its conventionally raised standard of normalcy and acceptability to the hostile, queer, and exotic. The ill-fated, starving Kulsum’s survival on the mere inhalation of the essence of food to satiate hunger establishes the wealthy family’s town-bred daughter-in-law Hamida’s tendency to faint before her misfortunes. Similarly, the aestheticism behind planting and nurturing the flowering plants in townsman Ismail Husain’s garden fails to convince and appeal to the villager Tamiz, who finds normalcy and contentment in cultivating chillies and onions back in the village farmland. The readers from the metropolises will be able to identify Hamida’s fragility and Ismail’s aesthetic sensibility from the new angle of margin-centric exoticism. *Khwabnama*, therefore, has the potential to offer more than just meeting global readers in terms of accessibility to South Asian marginal literature. Thus, with its plethora of significances, *Khwabnama* emerges as a literary translation as well as a cultural translation of South Asian social alterity.

Natural and societal tragedies are the primary causes that impact the Indo-Pacific area and have garnered significant attention from environmentalists and activists worldwide. The release of the English translation of *Khwabnama* in 2021 reaffirms and validates the ecocritical

and postcolonial concerns within the framework of the current century when religious extremism and global warming coexist as the two significant imminent dangers to the region. The consequences of global warming, including heavy rainfall, and cyclones, have significantly deteriorated people's quality of life. It is contended that the relentless pursuit of even higher profit margins at the expense of workers' incomes and at a pace that exceeds ecological replenishment has resulted in the deterioration of Asia's wealth creators, which are people and ecology, in the context of globalization (Peralta, 2010, p. 56). The Machiavellians take advantage of the fragility of these individuals and deliberately promote prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination based on caste, class, and religion for their own personal and political gain. *Khwabnama* aims to challenge the existing dominant power structures, beliefs, and overarching narratives and instead focuses on the smaller, individual stories that are ingrained in the history and culture of Bangladesh. Thus, the story of *Khwabnama* cuts across strands of parallel concerns. These brief ideas about the politics, ecology, and environment of Bangladesh will help us better understand the events in the story. In the introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, Riaz and Rahman write, "[d]espite high population density, a limited natural-resource base, underdeveloped infrastructure, frequent natural disasters, and political uncertainty, the country has recorded positive developments in terms of both broad economic and social indicators" (2016, p. 1). Geographers and environmental scientists have long recognized the distinctive topography of Bangladesh. The country is characterized by its distinctive biodiversity, which is primarily comprised of low-level land with alluvial soil. It is also the location of the world's greatest mangrove forest. The delta, which is situated between the Bay of Bengal and the foothills of the Himalayas, is characterized by a vast network of both large and small rivers. As a result, it is frequently affected by natural disasters. However, in recent decades, global studies have shown that Bangladesh is at the forefront of global climate change (Riaz and Rahman, 2016, p. 2).

The extent to which land could possess an adverse environment and a volatile political situation is reflected in Akhtaruzzaman Elias's novel. Besides, he shows how the people of the land develop resilience against these adversities through the adaptation of the processes of ontological reorientations, beliefs, and metaphysical suppositions so as to adjust themselves to social and environmental crises. In *Remittance Income and Social Resilience among Migrant Households in Rural Bangladesh*, Mohammad Jalal Uddin Sikder, Vaughan Higgins, and Peter Harry Ballis write, "the term 'social resilience' originates from the Latin word *resilire*, meaning 'to leap back'" (2017, p. 51). Resilience can be developed through the adoption of an alternative way of "conceiving of reality", and incidentally, faith-based/ ontological magical realistic

elements are found in the novel. The supernatural event or presence in faith-based magical realism may serve as a metonymic or synecdochic representation of a different perspective on reality, typically one that is drawn from a non-western belief system or worldview (Warnes, 2009, p. 14).

The exotic, the marvellous, and magical realism are motivated by a desire to show the narrative cultural self as other. The perspective presented here roughly corresponds to that of Fredric Jameson, as echoed in Brenda Cooper's repeated assertion that magical realism emerges from specific societies – postcolonial, unevenly developed places where old and new, modern and ancient, scientific and magical worldviews coexist. (Cooper, 1998, p.216) There are instances of dialogue between the living and the dead spirits in the novel. Bereft of everything that is worldly in life, the metaphor of death is used to dissolve the paradox of life and death, and the aforementioned larger-than-life experiences and bondings serve as a source of strength and support. The words of Tamiz's father, long dead, resurface in the realm of his son and wife throughout the novel. For instance, the spirit of Tamiz's father once during a stormy night reappears:

‘Why can't you hear me, Boikuntho?’ While he continued to shout, the top of the jackfruit tree broke off and crashed on the roof of Tamiz's unoccupied room. It was obvious now that Tamiz's father had informed everyone of Boikuntho's death by snapping the head of his favourite jackfruit tree. (Elias, 2021, p. 366)

In this context, the segment of the worldview presented in *Khwabnama* finds resonance with the African world as presented by Birago Diop in his poem “Breath” where “a natural world animated by the spiritual energy of the ancestors”, and “the presence of the dead among the living” is portrayed (Warnes, 2009, p. 143). In this context one can refer to Warnes's statement, “awareness of the absence, silence, the ghosts are also awareness of the ‘other’, and of the otherness of the other, which, as in Levinas, becomes the basis for a substitution of ethics for ontology, of respect for knowledge” (2009, p. 150). In line with the principles of magic realism, Derrida advises us to embrace the presence of the ghost and cultivate a sense of hospitality towards it. He suggests that we should strive to engage in meaningful conversations with the ghosts, allowing them to express themselves or enabling them to regain their ability to communicate (Derrida, 1993, p.176).

Through the combination of historical facts with fantastical elements and highlighting the socioeconomic divisions that underlie certain events in colonial Bengal, the magic realist narrative expresses the voice of the other and enables them to communicate what is otherwise

repressed in the society. Drawing on the history of Tebhaga, the novel upholds the revolutionary spirit of the peasants who sacrificed their lives to claim the rights earned by their blood and sweat (Elias, 2021, p. 222). The novel portrays the severe subjugation of the peasants by zamindars, which led to the Tebhaga movement, a peasant insurrection that took place during 1946-47. Being intricately involved with the politics of the land, the materialization of the historical movement is found across multiple places in the novel:

Along with the abolition of the system of *jomidars*, a bill to institute the tebhaga system would also be introduced in the assembly. They had written as much in Millat magazine. Once the bill became an Act, the *jotedars* would have no choice but to let the *aadhiars* take two-thirds of the harvest. Nor would they be allowed to evict any of the *aadhiars*. (Elias, 2021, p. 198)

The peasant class constructs one concrete reality – the revolutionary project of the Tebhaga, amidst their world of absurdity, dream, and shadowy existence. Therefore, *Khwabnama* can be interpreted as a grand portrayal of a dream-filled universe where dreams and reality intersect and where various aspects of marginalized living are connected with the tumultuous history of colonial Bengal. Elias skilfully contrasts the harsh reality of those imprisoned in extreme poverty with their shared aspirations through his vivid imagination in his novels. Drawing an essence from the unaffordable, fortifying their senses with the sight and reach of the unfathomable and drawing out a vision from the dark and invisible, thereby adopting dream in wakefulness, an alter reality amidst reality:

After all, sleeping was a form of work for Tamiz's father—it could even be called his favourite profession. He had to put in hard labour in his sleep, for that was when he moved about, searched for things, pondered and worried, felt anxious and agitated, planned and plotted. (Elias, 2021, p. 38)

The agrarian process of tilling, reaping, and harvesting is synecdochical of the peasant's life, art, sexuality, dreams, and expression. An instance of such expression through a dream is as follows:

There was a dream epidemic following the harvest. ... However, during the rainy season and the months of Aghran and Kaartik, people ceased having dreams. In Kaartik, their plight never got any easier. Adversity, however, was powerless over Cherag Ali. His explanations never lost their clarity, starvation or not. Kaartik was a pregnant month to him. (Elias, 2021, p.28)

The psychic and the palpable manifestations of the ontology of the cosmos:

In an era of globalization, there is an unrelenting push to reach ever-higher profit margins at the expense of workers' wages and at a speed quicker than ecological replenishment, which is precisely why the position of Asia's wealth creators – people and ecology – has got worse (Peralta). The peasant class, in terms of their occupation, share a symbiotic relationship with ecology and are, therefore, direct recipients of direct ecological adversities. *Khwabnama* is a representation of this reality. In the novel, it is observed how the strata of plebeians, being arrested by austere destitution, improvised states of sustenance, and the harsh realities of life, and their existence banks upon their desire, their vital force of dream. A reading of the novel mirrors a picture where the life of the people is organically connected to the land, wherein they draw their vital strength from each other as a singular organic entity:

Standing on the edge of the quicksand, Tamiz felt a chill. His father was somewhere in there, and his own body longed for the warmth of his father's. He might have spent all his life wandering around the lake, but Tamiz's father was a storehouse of heat. In some senses, it was not a bad thing for him to be resting here, for he belonged to this lake, after all. (Elias, 2021, p. 309)

The metaphor of the matrix is in function wherein, through the organic association, human beings and other natural objects draw nourishment from mother nature (Powell, 2011, p. 129). The entire livelihood of the people of the margin is borne out of their interaction with nature, for example, the fig tree (Elias, 2021, p. 6). In the story, the fig tree located on the northern side of the Katlahar lake is the central point, and the presence of Munshi's spirit that resides in the tree creates a quasi-divine enchantment. This enchantment, which acts as a centripetal symbolic force in the novel, echoes both the fantastical and actual aspects of the area. Therefore, nature is an inseparable element that is induced in every practice and dynamic of their life. Nature is the soul of their survival, sustenance and subjectivity. Their source of resilience stems from the episteme of nature, which reestablishes their organic connection. Still in a state of unrest with the attire of modern living conditions, unequipped with modern civic amenities, and blinded from the goal of rich material experience, they are as vulnerable as the open turf of agricultural fields and aimless as the flowing streams which are subject to the adversities of nature and threatening ecosystem. However, the people's connection with nature helps them to develop resilience. "The main aspect of the ecological view of resilience is continuity and adaptation in the face of systemic problems and ecosystems under threat" (Handmer and Dovers, 1996, pp.

489-490). The attachment of the personae to nature helps in the development of their resilience.

The following excerpt shows their intense engrossment with nature:

A large expanse of the land across the lake was given over to cultivation; beyond, on the other side of the narrow creek, lay Chashapara, the cultivators' village. Next to each of the houses stood a tethered ox, a battered pile of yellow hay blackened by the rain, cow-dung manure beside shrubs of Barbados nut, rows of banana trees, screens of dried banana leaves behind which the women could stay out of view, and a plough, a yoke and a harrow. (Elias, 2021, p. 3)

All the persona spirits and their manifestations in the novel dwell in the lap of nature:

Perched on the fig tree at the head of the lake, Munshi slipped into the eye of a vulture every morning and watched the motion of the sun across the sky, merging into the sunlight without warning, becoming the sunlight himself to warm the chilled bodies of the catfish, the carp and the small fry in the lake. And when he grew exasperated, he would turn into a tiny ball of fur beneath the wing of a green pigeon behind the dense foliage of the fig tree to sleep all afternoon in the warmth of the tender flesh. (Elias, 2021, p. 7)

The ontological practices of the characters connect them with nature as they worship the spirits immanent in nature, and the cosmos in *Khwabnama* is no exception in terms of faith, a space that remains mostly unrivalled in human history. In the narrative, the fig tree casts divinity, as it is the dwelling place of Munshi's spirit. So, the fig tree occupies a sacred place in the life of the villagers. Such worship of the divinity of the tree is present in the belief system of Bengal. In his book *Goddess as Nature*, Reid-Bowen discusses Starhawk's idea where "...ecological knowledge has become increasingly relevant to her understanding of the meaning of Goddess as nature; images, models and symbols of the Goddess have begun to converge with those of ecology..." (2007, p. 109). The sacrality of trees is often underlined in the popular and folk belief systems of the peasantry of Bengal:

Tree-worship in the pir form was known in other parts of Bengal. ... People in distress vowed to offer either *shirni* or a dishful of sugar wafers (*batāsa*) to the pir. Clay horses were also offered. According to its devotees, the tree grew from a twig which was originally used by the pir to clean his teeth. (Roy, 1983, p. 210)

The sacred power of nature that exists in culture is also portrayed by Elias's novel. The snake, another entity of nature, comes as a redemptive figure at a point in Tamij's life. Its appearance drives police away when he invades the home and yard in search of Tamij, brought by Tahaseen to capture him. Tamij had faced the allegation of being a criminal responsible for instigating Majhipara. In this case, resilience stems not from an individual level but from an overarching approach where humans and nonhumans share a symbiotic relationship. The power and significance of the snake in the novel can be emphasized by Asutosh Bhattacharya's essay "The Serpent as a Folk-Deity in Bengal", where he writes, "[a]n exclusive cult known as the Manasa-cult has developed this part of the country and is highly popular among all sections of the Hindus, especially among the lower classes in some areas" (1965, p. 1). So, beliefs based on nature act as a mode of resilience in the novel. Human resilience is informed by the participation of natural entities that partake in the sanctity of ecology.

Art as a means of escaping reality and a force for revolution:

Art can also serve as a mode of resilience. According to Megan Shand, art as a mode of resilience helps to build:

Most prominent, however, was the way art created access to a deeply personal dimension of self, enabling expression and processing of difficult emotions, identity exploration and restoration after illness and trauma, and exploration of spiritual dimensions of self, including identifying inner recourses as strength for resilience. (Shand, 2014, p. 96)

Art, as a mode of resilience apart from nature, occupies an important position in the life of the indigenous community, which is present in the novel. The eponymous title of the book, *Khwabnama*, around which the story is centred, is itself a piece of artefact. The art of dreaming and the art of writing about dreams coalesce. The interpretation of a dream is not just magical but is also an artistic act. The fictitious book named "Khwabnama" in the story deals with the art of interpretation of dreams, while the text that we are dealing with, Elias's *Khwabnama*, deals with the art of presentation of reality through dreams. The former, as well as the latter's artistic significance, resonates throughout the novel. The former, or the fictitious book as portrayed in Elias's narrative, belongs to minstrel Cherag Ali. It contains several figures and symbols that carry certain meanings and significance. An attempt to preserve and decipher an obscure book and its treatment as a trope of magical realism is cross-cultural. For instance, this trope is found in Latin-American literature such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Marquez

and “The Book of Sand” by Jorge Luis Borges. The deciphering of the symbols and figures in the fictitious book “Khwabnama” leads to an interpretation of dreams. Tamij’s father inherited the book from Cherag Ali, his father-in-law, until it was lost. The existence of the artistic significance of the book shares the same trajectory as that of the course of action that Elias portrays through his novel. This casts a significant impact on time, space, action, and personae in the novel. Cherag Ali, the minstrel, sustains himself by interpreting dreams and singing. He was also a *fakir*. A *fakir* is one who follows the mystic path, or *faquiri*, which is an ontological spiritual practice in rural Bengal. His folklore gives insight into the country’s social and ethnic background as well as the people’s perceptions and beliefs, and it reflects the Sufi and Bhakti lyrical tradition, a reflection of the rich cultural heritage of Bengal. To Cherag Ali, this art is a mode of sustenance. So, art is inherently a part of the local folk. Art is also employed by Elias as a refrain of lyricality in the novel (2021, p. 164). The rhythm of art that found expression through the voice of Keramat Ali, a villager, that expressed the oppression of peasants by the landlords and other villagers, had immensely struck the chord of the villagers’ sentiments and was the highest power that gradually fuelled the revolution of Tebhaga in the fiction. The following is an illustration of one of his compositions:

The farmer puts in all the labour, the jotedar gets the honey.
In two months, the peasant visits the man who lends him money.
...
But even with bullets in her leg, her heart is still strong.
The peasants will no longer take the tyranny of the jotedar. (Elias, 2021,
p. 189)

Art, here, aids in building resilience among the indigenous communities, who are constantly combating the tides of oppression, both social and political. The art that Cherag Ali passed on to his successor, Tamij’s father, both in the form of skill and scripture – *Khwabnama*, was preserved by his son-in-law, that is, Tamij’s father and his daughter Kulsum. To them, it was a sacred scripture. They, therefore, preserved the sacrality of the holy scripture:

Now she took out the oldest object in the room from where she had hidden it behind all the pots, pans and sacks on the maacha and breathed in its aroma deeply. The book belonged to her father’s father, but Tamiz’s father guarded it like treasure. ... (Elias, 2021, p. 15)

Art as a creative force in this fiction is underscored time and again. Art, in the indigenous context, can be included in the corpus of the “other” that has an autonomous existence

independent of narrow human interests. The destruction of the creative force that is art in *Khwabnama* draws the aboriginality of the cosmos into the pool of extinction. Keramat Ali, with his malicious gaze on the fictitious book “Khwabnama” and sacrilegious act in pursuit of material gain, destroyed the spiritual and literal existence of the book. He also destroyed the creativity that he inculcated from his wise companion Cherag Ali, who had induced the creativity within Keramat Ali. The malicious nature of human beings, as symbolized through the act of Keramat Ali, was the eventual jab on the ultimate primordial existence of a changing world. If art fosters resilience, Elias, through his poeumena of creative genius, gropes onto art as a mode of resilience in the pervasion of his nostalgia for the uncorrupted primordial world that gradually gets replaced by a state of chaos.

The synergistic forces of culture and religion combating destructive forces:

Apart from art, syncretism serves as a major source of resilience in *Khwabnama*. The synergistic force of the harmonious unison between folk and folk culture that belongs to a heterogeneous community that comprises Hindus and Muslims attempts to build resilience by combating the destructive force of partition generated by the policy of division based on religious lines. Without questioning the dialectics of the policy of division, the community establishes the idea of faith as a heterogeneous space that is truly hybrid, which contests the policy of bifurcation. The excerpt below reflects the same:

Boikuntho had no objection to this. ‘You’re right. Majnu had sent word to Bhabani Pathak. And what was his message? You may have Kali, but I have Ali. Your strength comes from Kali and mine, from Ali. Yes or no? Let us join hands. If Ali and Kali fight together, the Company won’t be able to withstand us for even a minute. (Elias, 2021, p.178)

The off-quoted lyrical excerpt resonates with the historical fakir-sannyasi rebellion that is mentioned in the text. The Fakir-Sannyasi Resistance was a collective armed resistance campaign by Muslim fakirs (sufis) and Hindu sannyasis (yogis) against the English East India Company’s control over Bengal. In 1760, this resistance commenced and persisted for more than four decades (“Fakir-Sannyasi”). This rebellion reflects the harmonious union of Hindu sannyasis and Muslim fakirs who united for the cause of the land. Elias traces a temporality in the trajectory of history that posits an alternative vision of historical, social, and religious understanding in contrast with an emergent religio-political tension that often posed an impending threat to the secular framework of contemporary society. Cherag Ali and Boikuntho,

in the novel, bear the testimonial of selfless love and comradeship, irrespective of caste, creed, and religion that history had once witnessed. Elias alludes to the elements of myths in the novel, such as Munshi's launching of "a sacrificial stake on the water of the lake" on the night of Kali puja, which invokes a motif of syncretism. This act of Munshi, who by name seems to be of Muslim origin, reflects a syncretistic confluence of Hindu and Muslim culture that occurred in the land where Islam was integrated into the local customs (Federspiel, 2007, p. 86) and Bengali Muslims steeping into preexisting non-Muslim tradition (Roy, 1983, p. 58).

The role of the unique quasi-divine faith world in building resiliency and constructing alter reality:

The unique faith worlds hold a significant place within the syncretic community that helps to develop resilience. According to Gleen Richardson, "Resilience is about discovering motivational centres in clients, and from a client's paradigm, most believe that their strength comes from their God or a creative force" (Richardson, 2002, pp. 314-315). The community here derives strength from the paranormal world and belief systems. I would aim at deconstructing the figure of the ghost in the context of South Asian magical realism, as presented in *Khwabnama*. The concept of ghosts is culture-specific, and *Khwabnama* reflects a certain folk understanding of the cosmos where the living and the dead, life and afterlife, past and present are not demarcated, and one finds a continuing presence of the past. The binary of living/dead that exists in some cultural belief systems is disestablished in that cosmos, whereby the dead spirit does not imply a repelling concept of a ghost casting an evil spell but implies a quasi-divine figure that asserts its importance and dwells in the daily lives of people and their invocation. In magic realist texts, the trope of ghosts is very important and is a part of the lived experience. So, the magic realist universe is multifarious in terms of its core ontology. The intervention of different entities, that is, humans, animals, and spirits, are the plural coordinates of this universe, and they are an integral part of reality. While exploring these aspects of unique folk culture as portrayed in *Khwabnama* through an anthropological magical realist lens, my reading has sought to explore the aspects of culture-specific social epistemology and deep world views inherent in the novel, bearing deep significance.

Drawing upon the South-Asian occult interpretation of dreams, Elias, in the novel, delineates the waning existence of the threatened indigenous community and their cultural repository that faces extinction. In the text, the occult dream is a metaphysically oriented signifier and is also a socially oriented signifier in terms of a semantic spectrum that is built around the term *khwab*. The concluding image of Tamij's helpless daughter, the last of the

dying generation, glaring at the moon from her mother's lap plausibly reflects a possible interface and confrontation of the reality that is conjured through dreams, the reality that comes forth and the future dream that is destroyed:

Planting her feet firmly on the parched, hard ground in front of the ancient termite heap under the tall palm tree on the high bank of the ox pool and craning her neck as high as possible, stretching her nerves taut, Sakina gazed with eyes that turned sharper by the moment ... (Elias, 2021, p. 411)

Composing *Khwabnama*, Akhtaruzzaman Elias emerges as a harbinger who sang the elegies of unsung legends, the tale of their loss and struggle, and their endangered pastoral life while simultaneously foretelling the multifarious affirmative connotations of their dream as an alter reality, a possible heterotopic space, and a vital force of life.

Conclusion

To conclude, dream-driven political aspirations have been vital in Bangladesh since its genesis and are still persistent. In recent times, this has assumed a new significance as young people, especially students in Bangladesh, have put forward their ambitious dreams of introducing a new chapter of social and political alterity. The interpretation of such dreams, however, belongs to the open-ended domain of the future. As in Elias's novel, in Bangladesh's political reality too, the art of dreaming and the art of interpreting dreams need to be closely intertwined. These two arts, only when organically linked, can lead to a fruitful poetics of transformative politics.

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