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Memory and Metanarratives: Recalling/Retelling 'Life and Political Reality' of Pre- & Post-Liberation Bangladesh in Shahidul Zahir's Novella

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ABSTRACT

A close connection exists between literature and history, especially in times of major upheavals in the political and cultural climate of a nation. While history posits itself as fact, literature represents those facts by connecting disperse events and telling an overarching story of the historical record. When understood in this context, historical memory becomes the cornerstone of individual and collective identities. The shared experiences enable a community to pull an array of distinct memories together into a coherent whole. The paper discusses how Zahir delineates a diverse range of characters and incorporates multiple arcs and trajectories; thereby expanding the novella to form a collective history and national identity of the people of East Pakistan. From the vantage point of the third-person, Zahir analyses the retrospective memory of 1971 that not only shapes the present of the victims but also reclaims their past and rewrites their history. Since memory plays a significant role in shaping the national identity. One notion of national identity mainstreams one group of citizens and relegates the other to a marginal existence. Hence significant moments in a nation's history are often interpreted in the light of conflicting metanarratives for pollical expediency. The paper explores Zahir's novella 'Life and political reality' and depicts the clash of metanarratives in Bangladesh during the war of liberation and after the 1975 military coup.

Keywords: *Memory, 1971 War of Liberation, Bangladesh, History, Identity.*

History, as Cicero quotes in De Oratore Book II, is "the life of memory". The role of history thus becomes instrumental in voicing the collective memory of people, especially those with past traumas. Collective memory goes far beyond being confined within cognitive boundaries and can recount a multitude of events that constituted history. It explores the manifold ways in which it shapes historical consciousness and establishes the relevance of documenting history

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for emerging nations. Shahidul Zahir's Life and Political Reality serve to establish the national history of Bangladesh through the blending of fictional elements with the circumstances that preceded and followed the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The political landscape of former East Pakistan and the horrific lives of marginalized people as opposed to those in power are depicted not only to render authenticity to the narrative but also to convey a sense of historical memory to the novella that is essentially fictional in nature. Zahir expands on the theme of memory by constructing a metanarrative that revolves around dispersed events in the past and characters who seek to trace and contextualize these events to make sense of their unsettling reality. Being a fictionist, Zahir tries to revisit and recreate the historical past by lending his imagination to the nonfictional account and using the trope of memory to institutionalize the blood-stained history of Bangladesh. Through its examination of Shahidul Zahir's novella, this paper lays bare the significance of memories and metanarratives in constructing collective history and national identity.

Born out of a brutal war, the creation of Bangladesh as a sovereign state is a tragic account of the dichotomy between East and West Pakistan and its political fallout. However, the narrative of the apocalyptic war that resulted in the germination of the nation called Bangladesh was later recognized differently in these two countries.

> "Growing up, East Pakistan was rarely discussed and the creation of Bangladesh always seemed sudden and illegitimate. The years between 1947 and 1971 received little focus, as was the case with the increasing estrangement of the two wings (east and west) and the brewing resentment among the Bengali Population" (Zakaria 11).

While the world viewed 1971 as the 'second partition' of the Indian subcontinent and the birth of a new nation, Pakistan was determined to construct a different collective memory for its people and to push aside the entire discourse as an Indo-Pak war. Saqoot-e-Dhaka, 'Fall of Dhaka' and 'dismemberment of Pakistan' were some of the terms Pakistan used to refer to the hallmark of Bangladeshi history. "In Pakistan, I was taught that Bangladesh was a product of the third Indo-Pak war. It was another bilateral conflict between the two historic enemies." (Zakria xii). The two countries in the subcontinent manipulate the historical memory to suit their political metanarratives and legitimize their positions. Theorizing such manipulations, Gusevskaya and Plotnikova reflect:

> Identity, both ethnic and national, is rooted in historical memory. Therefore, historical memory manipulations for political purposes are also manipulations of group identity. National identity, therefore,

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> appears as an imperative when choosing the historical path of the nation's development. It acts as a result of the past and at the same time as an interaction with the future, and, consequently, the formation of national identity positive images and historical discourses can contribute to solving the problems of national integration. (Gusevskaya, N. & Plotnikova)

Bangladesh, after the terrible assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman and his family, could not freely celebrate the heroic struggle for its liberation, which enabled it to carve out a separate identity for itself on the world map. Ever since the 1975 military coup, there has been a significant alteration in Bangladesh's political structure. In her book, 1971: A People's History from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, Anam Zakaria presents many of her interviewees' perspectives, one of whom was Kabir, a staunch Awami League supporter who shed light on the aftermath of the coup of 1975.

> "After 1975, our textbooks were censored; they tried to erase our history. We could no longer say that Pakistan's occupying forces had attacked us or that India's allied forces had helped us. People like Ziaur Rahman were backed by Pakistan and wanted to project Pakistan in a positive light and India in a negative one. If you read our textbooks from that time, it seemed as if fictitious forces had occupied us and fictitious allied forces had helped us because we couldn't name either" (Zakaria 27).

The obliteration of the memory of the liberation of a nation from an oppressive regime, that drew its legitimacy from the monolithic notions of religious hegemony was essential to rehabilitate the religious fundamentalist groups, who felt eclipsed after the resurgence of Bangla cultural nationalism during the 1971 war of liberation.

The victims and people who supported the war of liberation felt terribly disillusioned at the attempts of the ruling elite to derail and redefine the entire Bangladeshi identity. Owing to the insufficiency of documents, political manipulations, and historiographical complexities, Bangladesh collectively could not properly educate its citizens on its liberation war. Sarmila Bose, in her book Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War, claims that "in spite of the passage of three decades, Bangladesh collectively failed to produce well-researched, documented and thoughtful histories of 1971 which might influence world opinion with any degree of credibility. The conflict of 1971, therefore, is in need of serious study in many aspects." In the same vein, Ranabir Samaddar, in his article, "Interpretations of the Bangladesh War," speaks about the gravity of the issue and the need to fill the lacuna, "For the politics of the nation 'an authoritative and comprehensive' history of liberation war has become imperative."

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In the year 2016, the matter came up for discussion in the 144th meeting of the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh. The issue of "how the current students lack patriotism and love for Bangla language due to the absence of subjects on the origin of Bangladesh as an independent nation, and its literature and history in higher education curricula" was particularly addressed. Subsequently, "a decision was taken to make two courses- History of the emergence of independent Bangladesh, and Bangla Language and Literature - mandatory in every department of all universities across the country." (Ruhani)

Life and Political Reality, as the title suggests, revisits the grotesque political reality of 1971 by investigating a compendium of memories from a third-person narrative. Zahir, in his attempt to address the lacuna in Bangladeshi historiography, tries to bring out fictive voices from the neighbourhood of Lakshmi Bazaar to speak the truth of Bangladeshi history. Zahir has consciously chosen 'Lakshmi Bazaar' to be the central locale of his narrative since the Hindu-concentrated areas of Old Dhaka were particularly targeted during Operation Searchlight. "The army also launched a genocide campaign on the inhabitants of old Dhaka, particularly in Shakhari Bazar, Tanti Bazar, Luxmi Bazar, Narinda and Moishandi" (Islam). Pakistan or 'The Land of the Pure' harboured enmity towards the Bengali community, the people of East Pakistan, since they (Bengalis) were Hindus or converted from Hinduism and spoke their native language. According to the Bihari Muslims of West Pakistan, they were not 'pure' Muslims and thus began the monstrosity of "ethnic cleansing" of Bengali Hindus on the Land of the Pure.

> "Researchers identify that there had been three instances of partition in the region of South Asia, dated 1905, 1947, and 1971. People in Bangladesh often find this proposition unacceptable, as, for them, 1971, above all, is marked with their liberation war." (Ferdous xii)

In a world of multiple voices and histories, an overview of Bangladesh's historical trajectory becomes imperative to trace how East Bengal became East Pakistan, which finally resulted in the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Shortly after the 1947 partition, the two wings of Pakistan started growing resentment on account of a series of events and factors; however, the nuances of the rift between East and West [Pakistan] are hidden under the folds of the narratives of 1905, 1947, and 1971 that need to be peeled away. In the year 1947, not only the dominions of India and Pakistan were partitioned, but there was also a split of two of the major provinces: Bengal and Punjab. Back in the 1900s, the British operated communal strategies both on national and provincial levels. "At the national level, strategies like the Morley-Minto reforms

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established separate electorates for Muslims in 1909. Separate electorates meant that Muslims with the appropriate voting qualifications would only vote for Muslim candidates." (Khan 43) While at the provincial level, "divide and rule took some specific forms like the short-lived administrative partition of Bengal in 1905." (Khan 43) With this, the first-ever partition of Bengal became a territorial reorganization of the Bengal Presidency: East Bengal and West Bengal with Dhaka as the capital of the East and Calcutta of the West. While the union of West Bengal with Orissa and Bihar reduced Hindus to a minority, the Eastern part of Bengal had a significant Muslim majority. It was primarily a British administration division to divide Bengal on religious grounds to invite Muslim loyalty to British Raj. Although this administrative partition of Bengal lasted only for a brief time, the colonial intervention contributed to the amplification of divisions and the creation of identity politics.

The conflict of 1947 was primarily about the quest for a more significant share of power and privilege, which was also fanned by communal politics. The partition is commonly perceived as Muhammad Ali Jinnah's attempt to carve out a separate space for the Muslim community. However, Joya Chatterji in her book, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947*, asserts that partition was not only supported by the Muslims, but it also served the interests of the Hindu Bhadralok of Bengal. While Muslims were the majority in Bengal, their economic condition was not as good. According to Koushiki Dasgupta's journal article, "In two Muslim majority districts like Bengal and Punjab, Muslims basically remained rural and agriculturalist, while in the provinces where Muslims were a minority, the existence of an urbanized commercial cum business class was visible." Although they specialized "in the trade in leather and skin, oil products, luxury articles and in textile, they remained more or less weak in all other branches of commerce, even in banking and finance" (Dasgupta). On the contrary, the Muslim government in power promised tenure incentives and improved economic prospects. With Muslim political parties winning provincial elections, Bhadralok's hegemony was endangered. Subsequently, to maintain their domination, the Bhadralok mobilized the Hindu community to demand partition. Chatterji argues that "not only was the Congress High Command ready to pay the price of the Partition in order to strengthen its hold over and unitary India, but that the Bengal Congress campaigned successfully for the vivisection of its province on communal lines" (Chatterji 266). Thus, the rising Muslim separatist politics in conjunction with Hindu communal politics and the failure of a fair distribution of power led to the violent partition of Bengal in 1947.

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The Muslim League, which was founded in 1906 in Bengal, had capitalized on its enormous popularity in East Bengal. With this, it won "115 out of 250 seats in Bengal in the 1946 elections, securing 95 percent of the urban Muslim vote and 86.6 percent of the Muslim vote for the province on the whole" (Jaffrelot and Schoch 89). The Muslims of East Bengal supported the Muslim League hoping for a better future with economic empowerment.

> "When Bengali Muslims voted overwhelmingly for the Muslim League in 1946, they were not voting for Pakistan but for a life free from zamindary rule and famines. Bengali Muslims were mostly peasants, sharing many traditions with their Hindu and Buddhist counterparts. But most of the landlords were Hindus" (Chowdhury).

It could be safely argued that the creation of Pakistan would not have been possible if it were not for the support of East Bengal. However, what largely germinated the Pakistani movement in East Bengal gave rise to Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan, which eventually gave birth to the sovereign state of Bangladesh.

"The streets and alleys, the walls and the monuments, the memorials and the museums bore the marks of a violent past that Bangladesh was adamant about remembering and retelling" (Zakaria 23). Following the coup d'état staged by the BNP-Jamaat alliance in 1975, Bangladesh saw an increase in state-controlled history politics, as evidenced by numerous textbook revisions, new commemorations, and the renaming of roads after collaborators (Shankhari Bazar was renamed "Tikka Khan Road" – after General Tikka Khan, the man behind Operation Searchlight). The heroization of collaborators and the political influence of Jamaat-e-Islami serve as the examples of the notion of history politics. (Zakaria 81). A new surge in the promotion of nationalistic history occurred when Bangladeshis recognized the military-led societal-political reconstruction and how it influenced the patterns of national historical memory. Zahir, in his attempt to restore the prominent narrative template of Bangladeshi history, pulls a series of events from the past together into a coherent whole by juxtaposing history with memory. He has layered his writing with non-fictional and fictional versions of memory in conjunction with literary devices such as a complex time structure and free indirect discourse. The narrative representation of the consciousness of the people of Lakshmi Bazaar rests on the concept of memory, which creates meaning retrospectively. He has painstakingly delineated the characters that chronicle the essence of the political turmoil that Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) went through and the devastating impact it left on the lives of its victims and their families for decades.

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The novella unfolds through the perspective of a ubiquitous narrator interspersed with the now-adult Abdul Mojid's flashbacks to his formative years in the neighbourhood of Lakshmi Bazar. As a mnemonic practice, Zahir uses people's voices as a mode of remembering and memorializing the obliterated history of Bangladesh. He has not only rooted the narrative in real places but also provided multitudinous layers of stories, thus going beyond to construct a metanarrative that mirrors the socio-political reality of the people of East Pakistan. By virtue of flashbacks, Zahir has incorporated various episodic and intrusive memories of the people of Lakshmi Bazar and tried to accentuate the trauma and tribulations of the community. He has integrated sociological, historical and psychological perspectives to bring "a comprehensive explanation of all that exists and occurs" (Erickson 273) to the fore.

Metanarratives encode historical events and information and produce meaning through them. The novella's most intriguing vignettes rely on Abdul Mojid's memoirs, which deftly intertwine with several story threads, giving readers evocative, surreal images of atrocious violence and its indelible impact on the victims' families. The novella's opening scene sets up the relevance of the past events in the narrative storyline, as a young man in the present, Abdul Mojid, is forced to recall his horrifying past when his sandal strap suddenly tears. With the ominous snap of his footwear, "he entered the sphere of a tinnitus" (Zahir 3) and could not help but notice Abul Khayer — a memento of the past. "It occurred to Abdul Mojid that his heart had been riven for a long time, but that day, in the melancholy afternoon of the carnival of termite slaughter, hearing what Abul Khayer uttered, his heartstrings, like the strap of his sandal, snapped once again" (Zahir 4). The sight of Abul Khayer, announcing the return of the collaborator and orchestrator of rape and violence, opens up the floodgates of Mojid's horrendous memories of 1971. The narrative gains momentum as Abdul Mojid imagines the feasting crows coming out of Abul Khayer's blue-coloured jobba and observes the croaks of crows that instantaneously bring back the dark shadow of Moulana Bodruddin.

Mohammed Bodu, as he is known in the novella, is a paragon of the psyche of the Bihari community in Bangladesh — a linguistic minority group that speaks Urdu. The community explicitly opposed the division of East and West Pakistan, akin to Jamaat-e-Islami, and some of them collaborated with the Pakistani Army against the nationalist struggle of Bangladesh. In order to put down the armed uprising and revolution led by Bengali nationalists, Lieutenant General Tikka Khan, the Governor of East Pakistan, promulgated The East Pakistan Razakars Ordinance of 1971, creating a armed forces called "razakars", which consisted of people from

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Bihari community and pro- Pakistan Bengalis. The leaders of the East Pakistan Central Peace Committee extended their cooperation to Pakistan's armed forces and one of them was Khwaja Khairuddin. ("Govt publishes list of Razakars 2019") Zahir's façade of fiction allows him to take creative leaps by portraying Khwaja Khairuddin's identity disguised as a fictional character of Moulana Bodu. Zahir has borrowed Bodu's character from reality to show the dehumanization and extermination of Bengalis done by the Razakars. Bodu's character unravels himself as one of the chief collaborators who opposed the Bangladesh rebellion in a multitude of events. Not only did they advocate for incorporating Islamic ideology into the state system, but they also sought vengeance on people they abhorred. The enmity between Moulana Bodu and Abdul Mojid's family underscores Bodu's sheer wanton cruelty towards the family. Moreover, Mojid's family did not quite fear him, much to Bodu's chagrin. "First, he told Abdul Mojid's widowed Ma that, of all the people in this moholla, it was only they who still had the nerve" (Zahir 10). This explains why Bodu remained vicious towards this family in particular until the very end of the novella. "Abdul Mojid realized that this audacious hatred had somehow turned his timid life topsy-turvy" (Zahir 12).

Although Zahir has commendably blurred the lines between fiction and reality, the similarities between the fictitious Moulana Bodruddin and prominent politician Khwaja Khairuddin are fairly conspicuous. A YouTube video film reveals how "Khwaja Khairuddin of Dhaka Nawab family aided the Pakistani Army by providing them a list of people to attack while at Shankhari Bazar." ("The Shankhari Bazaar Massacre of 1971" 1:38) The film also describes how the Pakistani Army rounded up and killed hundreds of Hindus in Shankhari Bazar. (0:30). In parallel, Zahir paints a picture of Moulana Bodu, dressed in a grey-colored poplin jobba, who "carried out a veritable slaughter in the streets, houses, courtyards, well-sides, and roofs of Lakshmi Bazar" (Zahir 20). Zahir's omniscient narrator also divulges how Bodu fled Lakshmi Bazar in the month of December 1971 (Zahir 52) which equates to how Khwaja Khairuddin left for Pakistan after the liberation of Bangladesh (Khaeruddin, Khwaja). Khairuddin, eventually, got elected as the Vice-President of the Pakistan Muslim League, akin to how "in the year 1980, Moulana Bodu became a major leader of the same political party that he had belonged to" (Zahir 26). The joint protest against the government ensued after the alliance between Moulana Bodu's and Ajij Pathan's party, which rehabilitated and mainstreamed the politics of Moulana Bodu's party.

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Zahir has given himself a creative license to take the premise and a few characters of the novella from real life while fictionalizing certain details and characters. He has shrewdly incorporated three timelines in his short, yet overarching narrative to debunk the sufferings of the Bengalis. The inception of the novella directly takes the readers beyond the aftermath of the war to 1985, and it keeps flashing back to an array of events from the pre-and post-1971 war. The plot runs backwards and forwards at the same time, with the beginning [timeline] being the actual closure of the novella. The absence of linearity in the plot may seem complex; however, Zahir's labyrinthine narrative mirrors the confusion, intricacy, and chaos of these occurrences. The novella travels through time, unearthing past episodes of various characters and events that tie together to form a meaningful history.

The mental landscape of the protagonist and the voices of the wounded community of Lakshmi Bazaar gradually put the pieces together to unravel the unspeakable truth of their neighbourhood. From a 13-year-old Muslim boy named Allaudin. who was the first casualty of the conflict in the neighbourhood, to Momena, the long list of hapless victims of West Pakistani exploitation gets unrolled in a frenzied haze over a single, long, uninterrupted paragraph. Zahir has done so deliberately to underscore the horrid, blood-stained reality of 1971 which changed the social fabric of Bangladesh with far-fetched consequences. The ever-shifting viewpoints depict a socio-political reality that is merely a collection of subjective experiences. Through these forays into each character's ordeal, Zahir shares the collective memory of the moholla, Lakshmi Bazar. "But the people of Lakshmi Bazar who kept on forgetting the past saw that their past broke unremittingly through the soil and sprang up, like shoots of grass." (Zahir 60)

In his journal article, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," Assmann argues that "Cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity." In the same vein, it could be safely stated that cultural memory is a significant catalyst for social cohesion. As a maestro storyteller, Zahir pulls out traces of the past from the reservoir of cultural memory and communicates the images of the past to the people of Lakshmi Bazar.

The episode of the broken strap of Abdul Mojid's sandal runs like a leitmotif through the narrative, which creates an impression of how the past refuses to stay in its place and comes flashing before eyes at the most trivial of occurrences. Zahir has referred to this incident a total of six times in his novella, each time causing a rift in time that sends Abdul Mojid to the

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gruesome events of 1971. The first ominous snap foreshadows the reversal of fortune, which further gets foregrounded when Mojid imagines crows emerging from Abul Khayer's jobba and sees the rehabilitation of Moulana Bodu (Zahir 3). On the other four occasions, Mojid is tormented by the ghosts of his gory past and his deceased sister while lamenting that he is still caught in their web. The final time the narrator alludes to this incident is when Mojid finally learns that there is no escaping the past and eventually makes a decision to leave his neighbourhood for good (Zahir 82). The violent conflicts and the massive upheavals that prevailed in the course of the nine-month-long civil war, scarred Mojid's psyche so much so that even his memories of the grotesque past disrupted his present and cast a dark shadow on the future.

> "Abdul Mojid realized that even after stepping into adulthood, he was a weak sort of man, he was fearful and always somewhat anxious; but despite all that, he could not forget about the hate, and when he gazed at Yasmin's face, his hatred turned to rage" (Zahir 12).

Mojid's past experiences left internal traces and it is these traces that trigger him into recalling and reliving them, thus bridging the past and the present. The impact of such disturbing events is so profound that they become "ingrained in collective memory" of the victims (Halbwachs). Throughout the course of the novella, Zahir refuses to relegate people's trauma post-liberation as he chooses to draw back the curtain to reveal people's visceral fear of re-experiencing the turmoil of 1971. The consequential action of Abdul Mojid leaving the neighbourhood of Lakshmi Bazaar once and for all reveals his scarred reality. It is this loss that Zahir foregrounds in his writing.

The expanded realization of loss, disorientation and deracination becomes important for Mojid and thus, through continual reflection, he keeps the past alive not only to form a sense of self within the community but also to acknowledge and accept the past to forge a meaningful identity in the present. "Later, when Abdul Mojid named his daughter Momena, he didn't do that because he was forgetting her name; rather, he did that because this was a name that ought not to be forgotten." (Zahir 81) Momena's horrific death, in particular, left Mojid traumatized, but by naming his daughter Momena, Mojid actively chooses to recall the past and prevent it from fading into obscurity. "Our past history is an important source of our conception of ourselves […], our conception of our own character and potentialities" (Connerton).

Moulana Bodu, like Khwaja Khairuddin, is a collaborator who is opposed to the rebellion of east-Pakistanis against the Pakistani establishment that follows hardline Islamic policies. His

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servile adulation of Captain Imran, an officer of Pakistani armed forces, pitches him against most residents of Laxmi Bazar, who sympathized with the liberation struggle. Pakistani Army, on his recommendation, eliminated Muslim cleric Khwaja Ahmed Ali and his son Khwaja Shofiq, who were very popular. He tells the mohalla folk that "Khwaja Ahmed Ali was a munafiq, a hypocrite." (Zahir 61) His popularity suggests that he is denounced for not being a pro-establishment cleric. His machinations led to seven killings and three rapes in one day, a terrible memory for the residents of Laxmi Bazar. Razakars, who scared people through their violent behaviour and spied on them, helped Moulana Bodu. Abdul Goni, "as a vigilant razakar of this country that was swarming with enemies, kept Moulana Bodu informed at all times, even about the speed and direction of the wind." (Zahir 38-39) Goni was responsible for the death of many people "whose headless torsos were taken at night by rickshaw-van and thrown into Buriganga river, while the severed heads were buried outside the Christian cemetery." (Zahir 40)

Moulana Bodu's complete identification with the Jamaat worldview becomes evident when he observes dim-witted razakar Abdul Goni chewing Tulsi leaves. He becomes furious, "Hindus worship the tulsi plant, this is a Hindu plant." (Zahir 71) He instructs razakars to "cut from the base all the Tulsi plants from every house, whether Hindu or Muslim, and throw them at a spot on the road." (Zahir 71) Later when one razakar remembers that "Hindus use joba flowers in their worship", he tries to break the joba plant in Abdul Mojid's compound. Unable to accept the destruction of her joba plant, Mojid's elder sister, Momena, tries to stop the razakar. When the razakar refuses to pay any heed to her verbal enteaties, she threatens him with "a chopper from the kitchen and drives the trespasser out." (Zahir 72) Momena pays a heavy price for this act of defiance. After remaining in hiding for many months, she was finally taken away by razakars on 10th December 1971, a few days before the day of liberation. She is later found dead by her brother lying on the bank of a river.

> "One of her breasts had been cut off, there were severe lacerations from her stomach down to her thighs, and her whole right thigh lay sliced open like a watermelon; she was lying on her back, her body was pressing down upon the hands that were tied behind her." (Zahir 81)

Moulana Bodu's hatred for Tulsi is a metaphor for the contempt with which Jamaat and the Pakistani establishment viewed Bangla culture, which they considered tainted by Hindu influence. On the other hand, Momena's resistance symbolizes the devotion people of East

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Pakistan had for their culture, aesthetic values and traditions and their stubborn refusal to abandon them at any cost.

Ajij Pathan, in Laxmi Bazar, represents freedom fighters who left their homes to participate in the war of liberation. While the war of liberation was being waged, collaborators and the Pakistani army looted their properties. After the imposition of Martial law, Moulana Bodu, along with a gang of people, "broke the lock on Ajij Pathan's house and carried all his belongings to Moulana Bodu's." (Zahir 28) But with the change of power in Dhaka, the freedom fighters received a warm reception, while collaborators left their homes and went into hiding for their security. When Ajij Pathan returned to Laxmi Bazar on 30th December 1971, he entered his house "like a victorious general" (Zahir 28). "After Ajij Pathan entered his house, the people of mohalla broke the door of Moulana Bodu's house, brought out all things and piled them up in Ajij Pathan's courtyard." (Zahir 29)

The past is not simply ''received'' by the present. The present is ''haunted'' by the past and the past is modelled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present' (Assmann 9). Since the carnage of 1971, various forces have tried to control the narrative in Bangladesh and erode Bangladesh's historical metanarrative. However, the appropriation of the contested nature of history by the Bangladeshi state seemed problematic since it excluded the voices and experiences of East Pakistanis. Through his novella, Zahir has tried to debunk the perversion of the collective memory of East Pakistan at the hands of the pro-Pakistani Islamist government and contest the herofication of collaborators such as Moulana Bodu. It is important to remember that even after West Pakistan's humiliating defeat on a global scale, they did not give up and continued to wield power over helpless victims. They exerted themselves to cause collective amnesia so that a complete picture of their horrendous atrocities never emerges.

> "It is hardly surprising that the Jama'at-e-Islami Bangladesh (Jama'at), its students' wing Islami Chhatra Shibir (Islami Chhatra Shangha until 1971), its allies like Nezam-e-Islami and spawns like al-Badr, al-Shams and Razakars, and other collaborating organisations and individuals, did their best to deny the genocide and the mass rapes. Major General Zia-ur Rahman (Zia), who grabbed power following Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination, also did the same besides rehabilitating the collaborators and trying to annihilate the Awami League" (Karlekar).

Although the culmination of Bangladesh's liberation struggle paved the way for the people of Lakshmi Bazaar to untangle the past knots, the rehabilitation of Bodu and other collaborators reminded them of the burden of their past. The reinstatement of Moulana Bodu and his son

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Abdul Khayer in 1985 became physical reminders for Abdul Mojid that his atrocious experiences would not be forgotten. Disoriented with terror, he becomes conscious of the fact that "the past is never dead. It's not even past" (Faulkner). Mojid could recognize the dark influence of the likes of Bodu on the political climate of Bangladesh in the eighties. It made him choose to leave the neighbourhood that was home to him since "he did not want his daughter to fall victim, like his sister, to the bloodlust of Moulana Bodu or his sons…He knew that Moulana Bodu was practising the same politics now as he had in 1971" (Zahir 83).

The genocide that took place in Bangladesh is still one of the most heinous violations of human rights, and yet it has been dismissed largely by those who committed it. Zahir's attempt to recall the deplorable memories and narratives of the Bangladeshi liberation war is a fight against the distorted narratives of hegemonic forces led by elite groups in West Pakistan.

> "Memory involves a claim to truth, and it will not serve its other functions if that claim fails. But it is, as we are aware, all too fallible: it needs confirmation from and is sometimes corrected by other sources of information about the past" (Poole).

By recalling the memories and narratives, Zahir seeks to reclaim the national identity by disrupting the metanarrative circulated by the ruling elite after the 1975 military coup.

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