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Beauty Boarding and the Dhaka-Based Bengali Intelligentsia: Constructing Memory, Consumerism and Identity

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Abstract

Beauty Boarding holds a unique place in Dhaka's cultural history. Dubbed as Dhaka's answer to Kolkata's Coffee House, the establishment offers both dining and lodging facilities. The once vibrant informal literary gatherings spearheaded by many prominent Bengali modernist poets and writers and attended by a group of budding poets and writers regularly for a decade have provided the aura and ethos to the selfhood of the place. However, a massacre of many people by the Pakistani army and their collaborators at Beauty Boarding in the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh has made it part of the country's national history. Consequently, this space carries many memories, most of which have cultural and historical value. By drawing on insights from Halbwachs's theory of "collective memory," Lefebvre's "social production of space," de Certeau's "practice of everyday life," and the concept of "commodification of memory," this paper investigates how an interplay of memory, space, and culture is central to the identity of Beauty Boarding and how the authority concerned utilises its cultural capital to advance its business interests. It also highlights how a large part of Dhaka-based intelligentsia forms its identity based on its interaction and negotiation with the cultural history of the place.

Keywords: Beauty Boarding, cultural site, collective memory, consumerism

Introduction

Starting its journey as a restaurant of traditional Bengali dishes in a semi-abandoned complex of a Bengali Hindu landlord in the early 1950s, Beauty Boarding of

Old Dhaka has evolved into a popular cultural site and a “nucleus of creativity for poets” (Arif). It embodies traditional Bengali practices of *adda* (an informal chit-chat session conducted in a casual, relaxed manner—typical of Bengalis and other South Asians), poetry, music, drama, and gastronomy. It is a proud meeting place of Modernist Bengali poets of Bangladesh, which remained vibrant mainly in the 1950s and 1960s. It also internalises and embodies the collective trauma of the Bengali nation since the business institution-cum-cultural hub under Hindu ownership encountered the wrath of the marauding Pakistani army in the 1971 Bangladesh War of Liberation. It stands witness to the national, cultural and political evolution of Bangladesh over seven decades. Despite a series of socio-economic vicissitudes it has encountered, it endeavours to maintain its original character by serving up indigenous Bengali cuisine, holding literary-cultural programmes, and offering lodging facilities to clients at a reasonable rate. Visiting the site and/or receiving the Beauty Boarding authority’s variety of services is a treasurable experience for many. The authority is caring and careful to remain true to its cultural commitment and, at the same time, it utilises the cultural capital of the site to harness and advance its business interests. Cultural aura, symbols, and artefacts all turn into commodities up for consumption. The intermingling of both traditional and consumer cultures is part of the identity of this literary/cultural/historic site.

Beauty Boarding boasts a glorious history that predates its formal launch as a boarding and dining facility. Citing Samar Saha, the elder son of its founder Prahlad (also spelled as Prohlad[h] Saha), Mir Arif writes in an article (dated 14 October 2018) in the *Dhaka Tribune* that the building originally belonged to a zamindar named Shudheer Das. Before the Partition of India in 1947, it served as the office of a famous Bengali daily, *Shonar Bangla*, christened by Rabindranath Tagore himself. Shamsur Rahman and a whole lot of Dhaka-based poets and writers published poems and stories in this newspaper. Following the Partition in 1947, the newspaper shifted its office to Kolkata. However, this place soon turned out to be a literary and cultural hub in Dhaka when it was rented by Nalini Mohon Saha and his younger brother Prohladh (also spelled as Prahlad) Saha from a local neighbour. They launched a restaurant and boarding house business in the old house, acknowledging the significance of its location at Banglabazar, a busy business centre. Thus, an already historically and culturally important place turns into a business enterprise. In its new incarnation, it draws the attention of artists, poets, writers and other creative people from different areas. Being a meeting spot of groups of creative minds of varying orientations, this place serves as a ground zero of literary, cultural and artistic ventures. As a result, it becomes a part of Dhaka’s literary and cultural heritage accumulating an increasing amount of cultural capital over the years.

The first thing that might attract even a casual visitor is the architectural design of Beauty Boarding. This site is “a scene out of a turn of [an] 18th century novel. A dilapidated building, with a lovely green courtyard, pigeon hole resembling rooms and a community dining hall” (Chakraborty). The two-storey yellow building bears testimony to a bygone era, with its intermittent moss cover and a myriad of holes and cracks. The aged appearance, which is deliberately maintained, is intended to provide the visitors and lodgers with a feel of the place’s historicity and the heritage site’s authenticity. This zamindar house-turned-cultural hub evokes the memories of the British period as far as its architectural design is concerned. The yellow coating and the weary look with red bricks coming out refer back to the period of its construction. Besides, blackish spots dotting the exterior of the building reinforce the idea of the oldness of the site. Creepers and shrubs growing in the cracks of the building add to the charm of the British-era building. Samar Saha, son of the founder of Beauty Boarding Prahlad Saha, says, “We haven’t changed the place much... People still visit us to have a sense of its history”

(Meer). The landscape is in keeping with its special character as a reservoir of Dhaka's cultural past. An onlooker visiting the site is likely to tap into its cultural resources simply by viewing it with a bit of thoroughness. As Sara MacDowell says,

A landscape, therefore, can be a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings' (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988, 1), so any reading of it must focus on the visual images and symbols that help create it. Suggestions that the 'visual is central to the cultural construction of life' (Rose, 2001, 6) and assertions that 'what is potentially visible is omnipresent' (Lowenthal, 1985, 238) reinforce the notion that the cultural landscape is a key resource in the interpretation and articulation of heritage. (39)

MacDowell emphasises the importance of visual imagery in shaping landscapes as cultural symbols. His view aligns with the idea that any interpretation of landscapes is profoundly influenced by the visual and symbolic elements that define them.

As a heritage site, Beauty Boarding retains its visual appeal via a culture-conscious use of its exquisitely designed building. The building exudes a historic aura for its association with British-era landlords. In addition, it expresses majesty and aristocracy of the bygone time. Generally speaking, people tend to have admiration for old things including architectural sites. This royal-style building evokes that human sensibility in the visitors. Besides, the maintenance of the building with an intention to highlight its oldness and naturalness by avoiding much renovation helps in keeping its charm and character. It can be argued that the building with its features add to the identity of the place.

This site hosts a tastefully built and curated garden in the middle of it. Besides, certain plants and trees offer a feel of nature. A variety of flower plants keep the place scented and aesthetically appealing. The mango trees canopying over the site please the urbanites seeking refuge there against the backdrop of a rapidly urbanising city. Weeds, creepers, and shrubs growing in the cracks in the building are mostly kept intact. There are *tulsi* plants in keeping with the 'vibe' of a Bengali Hindu household. Even domestic cats patrolling the area remind visitors of a typically Bengali rural house setting. The old British-era building in an urban natural setting assumes a dual identity: historical and cultural. Such places can trigger multiple memories, for instance, of a visitor's rural background or aristocratic lineage. Sara Williams Goldhagen explains this phenomenon:

In the contemporary world, where our environments are overwhelmingly built environments, what this means is that buildings, landscapes, and urban areas we inhabit are central to the constitution of our autobiographical memories, and therefore to our sense of identity. (qtd. in Kaljevic 83)

In short, Goldhagen highlights the profound role built environments play in shaping our personal memories and identities, pointing out how the spaces we inhabit are not just physical surroundings, but integral to our self-conception and lived experiences.

The writers, poets and artists who spent significant time in Beauty Boarding have created "autobiographical memories," which many of them documented in their memoirs and creative writings. The built environment of Beauty Boarding has helped them foster their creative faculties. Similarly, their activities and presence have built a literary-cultural environment there. As a result, Beauty Boarding has become part of their identities, as much as they help it build its own identity. In a sense, Beauty Boarding and they are co-constitutive. This reciprocity of identity formation can be credited to the memories created and fostered within the space of Beauty Boarding.

Space is crucial to the identity formation of a place. Spatial management is key to any meaning-making project. Space is marked by its constant evolution and multivocality. According to Michel de Certeau, space is:

composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect of operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs and contractual proximities... In contradistinction to the place, it has none of the univocity or stability of the proper. (117)

Certeau contrasts space with place, viewing it as a dynamic, fluid construct shaped by movements and interactions. His viewpoint states that space involves conflicting actions and shifting temporal contexts rather than a fixed, stable entity.

Space is, simply put, a constantly evolving, dynamic and fluid entity. The dynamics of space are crucial to the construction of identity for Beauty Boarding. The transformation of a former landlord house into a lodging and dining facility is an ontological process and a step in the right direction because of its aristocratic association. The well-furnished dining room in the middle of a royal palace-like structure is an example of creativity as far as spatial management is concerned. If managed well, space can turn into a place with a multiplicity of meanings and associations. As per Henri Lefebvre,

An existing space may outlive its original purpose and the *raison d'être* which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated and put to a purpose quite different from its initial use. (167; *emphasis in original*)

Lefebvre brings into focus the fluidity of space, emphasising that it can transcend its original function and be redefined for new purposes. Such a view presents the dynamic relationship between space and social needs.

Over the years, the space within Beauty Boarding has been filled with memories of significant individuals and events. Although it has not remarkably been “put to a purpose quite different from its initial use,” that is functioning as an eatery and hotel, it certainly is a “reappropriated” space serving as a cultural hub. The traces, relics and memorabilia of the many years of the cultural and historical events have been preserved as part of the spatial management and reappropriation. In this connection, Maurice Halbwachs claims:

Now space is a reality that endures: since our impressions rush by, one after another, and leave nothing behind in mind, we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings. (140)

Halbwachs highlights space as a vessel for memory, anchoring the past in physical surroundings.

In other words, individuals visiting and staying in the site are supposed to have an aura of its cultural richness and a sense of history by locating themselves in its “physical surroundings.” As a matter of fact, it is the people whose movement and visit through and around the space of Beauty Boarding builds its identity. For the spatial theorist Michel de Certeau,

“[S]pace” is never ontologically given. It is discursively mapped and corporeally practised...it is not a space until it is practised by peoples’ active occupation, their movements through and around it. In this perspective there is nothing given about a “field”. It must be worked, turned into a discrete social space, by embodied practices of interactive travel. (qtd. in Clifford 54)

Certeau’s view emphasises space as socially constructed through movement and practice rather than a fixed entity. However, this perspective could further address how structural

forces—such as policies or economic constraints—shape and limit these spatial practices.

The space of Beauty Boarding in its present state projects certain ideas and values pertaining to Dhaka's intellectual tradition. This is because the space is marked with “signs of power” and “with tangible realization of values” (Castells 241). The architectural design of the erstwhile zamindar complex and a significant presence of nature make for a suitable space to be used in innovative ways.

Against such a backdrop, this qualitative paper explores the process of identity formation of Beauty Boarding by scrutinising the interaction between memory, space, and culture from a Cultural Studies point of view. It attempts to understand how the authority concerned commodifies and consumerises the institution's identity, cultural import, and historical value. In addition, it showcases how a large part of Dhaka-based Bengali intelligentsia, including poets, writers, playwrights, historians, film makers, politicians, thinkers, and professionals were involved in creating memories and forming identities based on their interaction with the cultural relevance and history of the place, and in turn, they also added value to the place through their own association. Besides, the paper demonstrates how Beauty Boarding has become a major business centre where experience and memory are commodified. Being a qualitative research paper, it analyses different secondary sources, such as books, newspaper articles, social media posts, TV plays, and digital documents. That no ground-level survey or first-hand interviews with individuals concerned were conducted remains a limitation of the paper.

Theories of Collective Memory and Consumerism

As already indicated, memory is an essential component in building the identity of a place. When a place becomes associated with individuals whose memories are constructed around that, it assumes life of its own, incorporating the memories. The individual or collective memories get enmeshed with the identity of the place where things happen. Besides, when significant events occur at a site, the site gets attached to the memories of them. Again, a place with all its specialities may become part of a community's cultural memories. Cultural memories, in turn, can be commodified. In this context, the theories of collective memory, for instance, the one formulated by Halbwachs and the theories of commodification/consumerization of memories come in handy. Stressing the collective nature of memory, Halbwachs says, “It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwachs 38). He adds: “collective memory provides the group a self-portrait that unfolds through time, since it is an image of the past” (Halbwachs 68). A Halbwachs commentator refers to the term collective memory as both “individual memories socially shaped” and “commemorations and collective representations” (Olick 336). On the other hand, “a ‘commodified memory’ is the understanding of cultural or collective memory as a transactional system, whereby memories circulate as goods” (Erbil 1043). Commodification is “the social process by which something comes to be apprehended as a commodity, as well as to the state of affairs once the process has taken place” (Radin xi). In fact, anything, including memories, “can be commodified, particularly if it is constructed and marketed in such a way” (Delany 33). This paper, therefore, explores how the collective (as well as individual) memories of Beauty Boarding are being commodified, and how memories, consumerism, and identity formation are mutually constitutive as far as Beauty Boarding is concerned.

As a cultural hub of postcolonial East Bengal/Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Beauty Boarding holds a prominent place in the memory of people at individual and

collective levels. Beauty Boarding and Dhaka's literary memories are stuff of the lore. The prominent and emerging poets of the 1960s thronged the site for their prolonged sessions of *adda*, which is a typical Bengali way of informal gatherings, conversations and leisure pursuits. In a *Dhaka Tribune* article Towheed Feroze mentions that in a society where most people maintained an ordinary existence, Beauty Boarding attracted those romantic individuals struggling with "inner turbulence", and unleashing their creative beasts in "language, celluloid, or canvas, experiencing mystical bliss" (Feroze).

The "Beautians" (famous personalities associated with Beauty Boarding) have recorded their memories of the place in their poems, interviews, and essays. Quite a few memorial pieces have been anthologized in two collections so far: *Purnimar Madhya Boyoshe 'Beauty Boarding' (Beauty Boarding in the Middle of a Moonlit Night)*, edited by Emrul Chowdhury and first published in 2010, and *Beauty Boardinger Sei Addata (Those Adda Gatherings at Beauty Boarding; our translation)*, compiled and edited by Pias Majid and published in 2020. Both collections have a few writings in common. The writings contain psychological aspects of the writers due to their nostalgic attachment to the place and the activities they were part of. Invariably, Beauty Boarding turns out to be a meaningful part of their "life stories," which have found their way into the two collections and elsewhere. Dan McAdams asserts, "Life stories are psychological texts that are jointly crafted by the individual himself or herself and the culture within which the individual's life has meaning" (115). That the individuals were once part of the famous *addas* and artistic endeavours is a status marker for them, which, of course, has motivated them to highlight the "Beauty Boarding" chapter of their life stories. In this regard, Bengali poet Syed Shamsul Haq revisits his memory of Beauty Boarding thus:

I used the space at Beauty Boarding for my writing.... Almost all of my writings between 1957 and 1962 were written there. These include *Ek Mohilar Chhobi*, *Ratko Golap*, *Janak O Kalo Coffin*, *Anupam Din*, *Simana Chhariye*, and the poems anthologised in the volumes *Ekoda Ek Rajya* and *Birotihin Utshab*. (6; *our translation*)

Syed Haq's old memories indicate how Beauty Boarding turned out to be an important place where poets, writers, and intellectuals used to produce their creative works.

Similarly, poet Shamsur Rahman reminisces about his days at Beauty Boarding in an exquisitely written poem titled also as "Beauty Boarding:"

I remember those days
When a few of us would go twice a day
To Beauty Boarding
Inside the narrow alley of Banglabazar
With a view to meeting each other
We used to pass intense hours
Simply over the cups of tea.
Sometimes we used to read out poems
In the voice of a cursed god
With our heads covered in hair burning like a sacred forest
And an intense burning sensation in the belly.
Sometimes we received the fragrance of flowers and sandalwood,
But sometimes only stings uncountable. (17; *our translation*)

Both Haq and Rahman acknowledge the significance of Beauty Boarding in their formative years as far as their literary careers are concerned. Not only they but also a number of creative individuals pursue their artistic journey there. Gautam informs that filmmaker Abdul Jabbar Khan used to write the scripts of his films inside Beauty Boarding. He wrote the script of the first Bangladeshi talkie *Mukh O Mukhosh* there. In

addition, the script of the movie “Kancher Deyal” was written at Beauty Boarding. Famous composer Samar Das composed many songs there (Gautam 15). Indeed, this place serves as a nursery for many creative works.

Since the very inception of Beauty Boarding, poets, writers, intellectuals, journalists, filmmakers, dancers, singers, actors, comedians, politicians, and businessmen have thronged the site. It is claimed that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman arranged meetings and gave political instructions to his partymen at Beauty Boarding (Gautam 15). Among the regulars at the cultural hub were Khaled Chowdhury, Debdas Chakraborty, Samarjeet Roy Chowdhury, Quayum Chowdhury, Sanjeeb Dutta, Fazle Lohani, Fateh Lohani, Bhanu Bandyopadhyay, Hamidur Rahman, Biplab Das, Abu Hena Mostafa Kamal, Brojen Das, Akhtaruzzaman Elias, Fazal Shahabuddin, Belal Chowdhury, Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, Abul Hasan, Mahadev Saha, Ahmad Safa, Hayat Mamud, Satya Saha, Al Mahmud, Al Mujahidi, Abu Zafar Obaidullah, Anisuzzaman, Muntasir Mamoon, Burhanuddin Khan Jahangir, Shafiq Rehman, Nirmalendu Goon, Jewel Aich, Emrul Chowdhury, Zia Ansari, et al. (Das 93). As per Asad Chowdhury, “In fact, any modern and progressive Bengali would frequent Beauty Boarding back in those days” (qtd. in Arif). These personalities are among Bangladesh’s cultural and intellectual elites. Their association with, attachment to, and activities centring around Beauty Boarding have created a host of cultural memories giving this site a cultural identity. This site, “entwined as it is with the growth of our poetry and literature, is so highly regarded by younger generations of writers. One can barely imagine charting a path for the development of Bangladeshi poetry without frequent references to this place” (Arif). Setha M. Low explains:

Place attachment is the symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space or piece of land that provides the basis for the individual’s and group’s understanding of and relation to the environment... Thus, place attachment is more than an emotional and cognitive experience, and includes cultural beliefs and practices that link people to place. (165)

Low’s concept of place attachment highlights its cultural and emotional depth, shaping identity and belonging. However, it could further explore how power and displacement disrupt these attachments, especially in contested or colonised spaces.

Undoubtedly, the meetings of the great minds of Bangladesh’s arts and culture have added meanings to Beauty Boarding. The “place attachment” of the “Beautians” to Beauty Boarding has helped it in its ontological journey (Das 94). Memories created by them, and their memories of the place, have constituted the character of this heritage site.

Beauty Boarding is a part of our collective memories for various reasons. Collective memories are site-specific and shapers of identities. Nora states that collective memories attach themselves to sites, as they are “grounded in geographic sites, providing geographical and spatial location upon which social meanings, and concomitantly, social identities, are fabricated” (qtd. in Flores 429). As already mentioned, a number of creative minds gathering at Beauty Boarding have contributed to its character. Dey observes:

Through their activities, the ideology of progressive and secular Bengali nationalism has advanced in this country. Judging by this, it can be argued that Beauty Boarding has played a key role in the development of progressive ideas here. In a word, this establishment is a labor room for the advancement of progressive ideas and secular consciousness. (53; *our translation*)

In sum, Dey considers Beauty Boarding a crucial space for nurturing progressive and secular aspects of Bengali nationalism.

Because of its role in the Bengali nationalist movement, Beauty Boarding became a target of the Pakistani military establishment. It has also become a part of the collective memory of Bengalis' traumatic experience of genocide unleashed on them by the Pakistani Army in 1971. As many as 17 people, including the owner Prahlad Saha, manager, cooks, staffers, boarders, and locals were brutally murdered on March 28. Interestingly, among the martyred people were Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Bengalis and non-Bengalis, indicating the non-communal, pluralistic, and secular nature of the place. The memories of the Liberation War, thus, characterise the site and add another layer to its identity.

Kevin Lynch opines, "Memory is the basis of self-identity, the self is a way of organizing temporal events" (124). There seems to be an impulse to inscribe memory at and onto the heritage site. There are plaques, signboards, register books, photographs, memoirs, etc., to document the history and preserve the memory of Beauty Boarding. The names of the famous "boarders" and visitors are inscribed on the signboard erected in the middle of the site. A memorial plaque has been set up to the memory of the 17 martyrs of Beauty Boarding. Old register books registering the payment and rent of the famous visitors and lodgers are kept as mementos of their historic association with this place. In this connection, Pierre Nora states, "Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image... hence the obsession with the archive that marks our age, attempting at once complete conservation of the present as well as the total preservation of the past" (13). Modern memory is structured like an archive, storing traces of the past in material forms. It depends on tangible records, ensuring immediacy through real-time documentation.

Commemorative programs are held regularly under the banner of Beauty Boarding Sudhi Songho Trust, which functions as an alumni association for Beauty Boarding. In this regard, a 2018 article in the *Daily Sun* informs:

A 60-member trustee board was formed in 1998, headed by Emrul Chowdhury, to retain the glory of the past of this nostalgic place replicating the prior organization, 'Sudhi Songho'. From 2000, the trustee board launched an award giving ceremony. So far Shamsul Haque, Belal Chowdhury, Kabi Al Mahmud, D[e]bdas Chakraborty, Asad Chowdhury and poet Rafique Azad were awarded by the trustee. The trustee board arranges reunion every year between the last week of December and [the] third week of January. And thus, they are trying to revive the old practice which [is] on [its] last legs. (Hasan)

The above-mentioned information shows how the trustee board has always prioritised the contributions of the Bengali intelligentsia through their manifold activities over other issues.

As mentioned earlier, two anthologies have been published recording the experience and memories of famous *Beautians*. Efforts to retain the memory of the site and restore its former glory are crucial to keeping its relevance in the context of the rapidly changing cultural realities of Dhaka city. It takes conscious endeavour to keep alive the pastness through presentness. As per Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, "[T]o secure a presence for the past demands work— 'memory work'—whether it is writing a book, filming a documentary or erecting a monument" (13). She also goes on to say, "Collective memory is not a given, not a "natural" result of historical experience. It is a product of a great deal of work by large numbers of people, all securing (mostly) public articulation for the past" (Irwin-Zarecka 67). Through a sustained, repetitive engagement of people with the things of the past, memory remains alive, and this is the case with Beauty Boarding. In addition, such efforts are conducive to the business interests of the

authorities. Therefore, the politics of memories are crucial to understanding this phenomenon as:

The specific memories are always interpreted from the perspective of the present. They are recalled and reconstructed in the present to satisfy current agendas. Memories are not about the past, but about the present and the interrelationship between the two, or as Nora states: “Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, bond tying us to eternal present.” (qtd. in Kaljevic 2-3)

The above discussion rightly underscores the interrelationship between the past and the present, with a special focus on Nora’s observation that memory is narrated from the viewpoint of the present.

In short, the initiatives to memorialise/commemorate cultural and historical events, archive historical documents, and preserve memorabilia serve the present interests of the authorities and individuals concerned. In fact, “[i]n the process of place marketing, history and landscape are commodified into saleable chunks” (Winchester 135). Indeed, commercial interests and dominant cultural narratives hold sway over the memorialisation/commemoration efforts undertaken by the Beauty Boarding authorities. In addition, memory associations of the site serve business interests of the Boarding authorities in myriad ways.

Beauty Boarding as a Cultural Site

Cultural programmes are held regularly at Beauty Boarding in keeping with the spirit of the place. Although it has lost some of its early charms, it still draws many culturally minded people from the country and beyond. New-generation poets and writers come to meet at Beauty Boarding twice a month (Arif). Musical programmes, drama stagings, and informal gatherings take place occasionally. Cultural aficionados, aspiring artists, literary enthusiasts, teachers, researchers, history lovers and people of different walks of life frequent the place to imbibe its cultural ethos. Many of them are also likely to create memories of the place by ritually re-creating the practices of the artists and poets of the bygone era, such as engaging in *adda*, dining at the hall, reciting poems, singing songs, playing instruments, strolling around, and staying in the hotel room. Thus, they intend to build a sort of identity as there are links between memory and identity that can be experienced and provoked through habitual routines and happenstances (De Nardi 95). The Beauty Boarding authorities encourage programmes and activities to help the institution retain and uphold its identity with their business interests in mind.

Defying fierce competition from rival businesses, the Beauty Boarding authority holds onto its name and fame in serving up a “veritable feast of a quintessential Bengali meal” (Arif). *Bhaat*, dal, vegetable curry, *bhorta*, *ilish* curry, *ilish* egg, *doi*, *dalna*, chicken, mutton, *shorisha ilish*, *chingri*, *nola*, *sharputi*, *foli* fish curry, etc. are some of the popular dishes. These food items are prepared following traditional Bengali recipes. No exotic items are available at the eatery. In order to taste traditional Bengali foods, Beauty Boarding is a favourite destination for many in Dhaka where foreign dishes are plentiful. It is not simply about eating Bengali gourmet meals, but also about eating there in the dining room located in a culturally rich ambience. This experience also adds to the eater’s identity as a culturally-oriented connoisseur of native food. Allan Pred rightly puts it: “The feelings, meanings, and memories are rooted in the interaction with and things at very precise local sites and times” (59). The surroundings of Beauty Boarding appeal to all five senses of the visitors making it a perfect heritage site. As per Emma Waterton, heritage sites are “multi-sensual sites alive with intense and often lingering

sounds, smells and sights” (24). The Boarding authority is cognisant of the sensuous aspects of the site.

Beauty Boarding has made its way into pop culture. There are countless blogs, feature articles, vlogs, documentaries, and TV plays featuring this culturally significant site. A teleplay titled “Beauty Boarding 1971,” scripted by Mesbah Uddin Sumon and directed by Abu Hayat Mahmud, has added a dimension to the pop cultural appeal of this heritage site (Mahmud 00:01:03-01:02:48). Based on the true story of the place in terms of its role as a centre of progressive Bengali cultural activities in the lead-up to the Liberation War in 1971, and as a site of massacre, the teleplay available on YouTube has placed the site in our pop cultural discourse. In 2022, Tanzina Hossain wrote a science-fiction novel titled *Beauty Boarding Rahasya (Beauty Boarding Mysteries)* based on the March 28 massacre by the Pakistan army. Moreover, Bangladeshi FM radio channel, Radio Foorti made an episode of its horror series “iScream” titled “Beauty Boarding” set in the location and context of the heritage site (Tanwir 0.40-8.38). This Gibran Tanwir directorial has brightened the pop cultural image of this historic place. Besides, a number of vlogs have recorded the touristic and eating experience of their participants. Famous vloggers including Salahuddin Sumon, Adnan Faruque Hillol, and Mir Afsar Ali (Mir-da) have made videos of the place making it all the more popular. In both digital and traditional media formats, Beauty Boarding is enjoying increasing attention.

There are a variety of cultural intermediaries that perform as factors behind the sustained appeal of Beauty Boarding among cultural aficionados, tourists, diners, lodgers, and ordinary visitors from home and beyond. It is not simply that Beauty Boarding per se comes across as a centre of power that attracts people. Rather, various intermediaries keep functioning as actors in the power play that maintains the longstanding interest among the public in the place and its aura. This reality can be explained through the concept of power relations as espoused by Foucault as he puts:

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (92-93)

In other words, power should be understood as a network of force relations that shape their own structure. It is a dynamic process of struggles that transform, reinforce, or overturn these relations. Power operates through interconnected systems or isolated contradictions and manifests in strategies that take form in institutions, laws, and social hegemonies.

As discussed to some length already, food and travel vlogs, newspaper reports, articles, blogs, memoirs, and documentaries reinforce “social hegemonies” and serve as influential promoters of this literary-cultural-historic site. They positively impact consumer choices regarding the place. They present historic vibe and cultural energy. One may enjoy visiting the place, consuming Bengali food, and having a traditional family atmosphere, literary memory and historical value. Readers of newspapers, viewers of visual media, and connoisseurs of literature and history are attracted to this peaceful retreat away from mundane and mechanised urban life. Cultural intermediaries’ power is decisive in determining people’s choices regarding Beauty Boarding. The

Boarding authority does not necessarily need to advertise itself. Rather, such taste-shapers and opinion-builders help sustain and promote the appeal of this site. Andreas Huyssen argues that “we cannot discuss personal, generational, or public memory separate from the enormous influence of the new media as carriers of all forms of memory” (431). The new media, primarily digital, helps us create memories of this place. Besides, it encourages or provokes us to feel the urge to build memories centring on this place. For example, a food vlog concerning delicacies at Beauty Boarding uploaded on a celebrity’s channel may encourage viewers to simulate the same experience and form similar memories. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are always there to popularise places like Beauty Boarding. Indeed, cultural intermediaries are creating a new consumer base for this cultural sanctum.

Navigating Cultural Consumption in Beauty Boarding

Culture is a commodity. Cultural experience, feelings, and expressions are saleable items. Tourists, visitors, lodgers, and diners constitute a client base for the Beauty Boarding authority. Memories attached to the site are also a selling point. As a host of cultural events and embodiment of cultural memories, this place asserts itself (or is promoted) as a commodity for consumption. People go there to buy experience and consume memories. The memories they create and share on social media networks are up for consumption by others. These digital recollections work simultaneously as products and advertisements. A 2019 article of *The Daily Star* mentions, “This place – Beauty Boarding – is more than lodging or delectable delicacies. Visiting it is like having a complete experience, where food and aesthetics are blended together in its rich tapestry of history” (Meer). The achievement of “placeness” for Beauty Boarding is underpinned by histories, literary gatherings, artistic activities, and cultural memories. This is because ‘[p]laces’, as Kuusisto notes, constitute significant sites which have been invested with meaning (1999, 15), often representing the ‘heritage’ of a particular individual, group or community. They are locations with which people connect, either physically or emotionally (Creswell, 2004), and are bound up in notions of belonging (or not belonging), ownership and consequently identity. (MacDowell 38)

The above observation denotes the deep connection between place, meaning, and identity, emphasising that locations are more than just physical spaces—they embody heritage, belonging, and ownership. This perspective aligns with cultural geography, which sees places as socially constructed and emotionally charged.

Therefore, individuals and groups make emotional investment in the cultural associations and symbols attached to Beauty Boarding. When “people (the audience) use and identify with particular symbols and artefacts, they express their cultural identities” (Nayar 45). This “connectedness” and “sense of belonging” on the part of people with cultural and intellectual predilections enable the Beauty authority to cash in on the cultural capital of the place.

Beauty Boarding is premised upon a concept of *Bangaliyana* (Bengaliness). The identity of the site is predicated upon its long association with Bengali arts, culture and literature thanks to the legendary *addas* of the creative individuals of the 1960s in the erstwhile East Pakistan. As a site fostering Bengali nationalism and literary works, Beauty Boarding internalises *Bangaliyana* as its core value. Since its inception as an eatery, it has remained committed to its goal of promoting Bengali dishes. Over time, this assertion of *Bangaliyana* turns out to be its identity marker and business strategy. In the present, visitors have an ample opportunity to revisit the past and soak in the

memories. In the same vein, (selective) memories of the place expressing *Bangaliyana* are highlighted in accordance with the current preferences and agendas of Beauty Boarding. Jonathan Boyarin writes that “memory is neither something pre-existent and dormant in the past nor a projection from the present, but a potential for creative collaboration between present consciousness and the experience or expression of the past” (22). In essence, *Bangaliyana* as promoted by the Beauty Boarding authority is about bringing alive the past to suit the needs of the present.

As already discussed, memories being identity ma(r)kers can be commodified. In the consumer culture of the contemporary world, people trade in memories. People visiting the place can, intentionally or not, buy memories. In order to make memories, they need to come to visit the place. In a way, Beauty Boarding thrives on cultural tourism. People visit Beauty Boarding to dwell on historical facts and aura. Sometimes, they rent rooms to travel through the realm of the past. As people situate themselves in the narratives embedded in the site, they also make meanings out of their interaction with the place and what it stands for. They can also identify themselves as the ones visiting the place, which once was visited by some shapers and makers of our culture and history. Somers and Gibson say,

[P]eople construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that “experience” is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way integrate these happenings within one or more narratives . . . (37)

Somers and Gibson’s argument effectively underscores the role of narratives in shaping identity, focusing on the fact that experience is not simply lived but constructed through narratives.

Therefore, as a tool for identity formation, people can consume memories as cultural products and the Beauty authority exploits the opportunity to make profits while winning popular goodwill and wider acceptance in our cultural community.

Memories are enjoying a digital turn all over the world. Beauty Boarding has made its place in the digital arena. The internet stores a bulk of information and images concerning the heritage site. Social media platforms host a variety of mementos vis-à-vis Beauty Boarding. Sofija Kaljevic explains the digital turn of memory-building thus: “Membership of the multitude may feel like being part of a traditional collective; however, the multitude forges a “non-sociable social” or “a sharing without sharing” because its digitally connected memory is both humanly and algorithmically archived” (39).

Digital media has enabled people to build memories without necessarily appearing on the spot. For example, by consuming pictures, videos, social media posts, and articles regarding Beauty Boarding, individuals can make sense of their connection to the heritage site. The viewers of a video on Beauty Boarding streamed on a digital platform may create a community through comments, feedback, likes, and shares even when they are not “actually” connected to each other. Such memory-making and identity-building, however, do not occasion the actual, hands-on experience of the place and its history.

Conclusion

To conclude, Beauty Boarding is a space-turned-place carrying memories of Bangladesh’s culture, arts, literature, history, and intellectual activities. This place assumes its identity from the people and events associated with it. The individuals once associated with Beauty Boarding have also built part of their identities involving the

place. People, using the site's space, create memories, and form their identities by interacting with and navigating through the cultural hub's history. The Beauty Boarding authority, fully aware of cultural politics, advance its business interests by tapping into the identities of the place, which are, of course, built around memories and spatial management of the site. This paper has tried to establish the nexus between memory, space, and culture in the identity-building process of Beauty Boarding and demonstrate how the heritage site itself functions as an identity ma(r)ker.

It is, therefore, incumbent upon the new generation of cultural activists, intellectuals, and media influencers to work towards preservation and promotion of this significant centre of literature, culture, and history. Existential threats to Beauty Boarding, reportedly emanating from political and communal elements, should be eliminated. Researchers should come forward to unearth the myriad aspects and potentials of this memorable site that carries a great amount of historical weight for a nation allegedly infamous for its collective historical amnesia. In addition, further research should be done in order to fill in the gaps in our current research, which is underpinned by an analysis of secondary materials. Ground level surveys could be conducted for a more comprehensive understanding of the import of Beauty Boarding, which would add to scholarship on historical and cultural sites in Bangladesh.

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