

Let's CHAT with the Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh!

Akbar Hosain

This article has taken up the rickshaw, which is a simple, mundane, and cheap transport in Bangladesh. More specifically, it presents rickshaw art in Bangladesh, which is a vital component of this cheap yet popular transport. The artistic genre is informed by interactions with the mode of transport, which has influenced its initiation, history and later development. In discussing this pop art form, this article focuses on a number of literate activity concepts: genre research, genre conventions and the artist's antecedent knowledge, their audience and tools etc.

The Rickshaw! What Is It?

The rickshaw (also sometimes called “cycle rickshaw”) is a three-wheeled vehicle that is very common to find in both rural and urban areas in Bangladesh. There's no engine in it; so the rickshaw-puller, or simply called the “driver” manually draws it and the pulling requires a lot of physical energy.

Rickshaws are a very popular mode of transport in Bangladesh. I think there are several reasons behind this. First, in comparison with other vehicles (such as cars, buses or minibuses), it is a very cheap transport. How cheap? Cumilla, the city I am currently living in, has thousands of rickshaws. Perhaps, it is the cheapest as well as most popular mode of transportation. I can travel three-to-four kilometers by a fare of twenty Bangladeshi Taka (or around 0.25 USD). In Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, one can travel to any destination by rickshaws. Another reason for its popularity is its availability on the street. No matter where you are, even if there are a limited number of transportation options, a rickshaw is always waiting for you, beside a road or the corner of a busy street or parked on one side of a



Figure 1: A rickshaw-puller with his rickshaw on the street. The bright paintings are visible.

circle. So, in a megacity like Dhaka or Chattogram, city dwellers most often prefer a rickshaw to save time by avoiding traffic jams (because of its smaller size it can maneuver through traffic faster).

A Brief History

The history of rickshaw is not very old: “As a mode of transport, rickshaw was first introduced in Japan in the early twentieth century” (Banglapedia). But unfortunately, by the 1950s it had disappeared from Japan. In the early forties rickshaws were commonly seen on the streets of Indonesia, Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries. The first rickshaw came to Bangladesh (in Chattogram) from Myanmar in 1919 (Banglapedia).

The first arrival of this vehicle dates back to the 1930s in the capital city of Dhaka from Kolkata, India (Wikipedia). How many rickshaws did Dhaka see in the beginning of 1940s? Can you imagine? Just thirty-seven (Banglapedia). Now Dhaka, Bangladesh’s capital, which is one of the densely populated cities in the world is home to “an estimated one million cycle rickshaws” (Msallem). Yes, one million rickshaws! From thirty-seven to one million. This skyrocketing occurred in just four decades. So, when Dhaka is

nicknamed as the *rickshaw capital of the world*, I think it is an accolade to this otherwise humble vehicle and its popularity.

Rickshaw Art: Beauty on the Mundane Vehicle

Let us read a short excerpt from a paper by a Nepalese writer, Jupiter Pradhan researching Bangladeshi rickshaw art:

Early rickshaws were invariably painted in simple dark blue and red, or any such combination of primary colors. The seats were made of black leather, wider and more comfortable; hoods were made of khaki waterproof canvas, and the iron frame of pipe painted in green or black.

Pradhan's research illustrates that rickshaws did not always include the vibrant forms of art that are characteristic of modern rickshaws. Rickshaw pullers were (and still are) impoverished people. They take up this vocation of extreme manual labor for earning a living to support their families. So, any thought of incorporating beauty and art was really inconceivable. A human being is pulling/carrying another human being by physical labor. At first sight, to a person who is foreign to rickshaws, simply the idea of it might seem a form of labor exploitation, but that is what you will encounter on the streets of Bangladesh. Over time, however, with the aim of attracting its passengers, owners of the rickshaws initiated the genre of rickshaw art. In fact, the idea itself is "an urban phenomenon" and has become hugely popular in the big cities and urban areas, which is how a humble, mundane transport came to embody beauty. We humans are worshippers of beauty and admirers of art. This marks the incorporation of beauty with daily usability.

As mentioned before, you can also find rickshaws in other parts of Asia, Japan, China and India but nowhere are the vehicles so artistically decorated as in Bangladesh. Most remarkably, on the back of Bangladeshi rickshaws you can see some pretty paintings in simple but colorful styles combined with/without one/two lines of caption/s. Political issues, images of great leaders, religious themes, cinema posters, natural landscapes, images of birds and beasts etc. are usually featured in this art form. A rickshaw is not a very expensive vehicle; usually lower middle-class and poor people use rickshaws as a means of their transport. And rickshaw painters/artists usually come from a very impoverished or marginalized class of society. They are regarded as low-status people in Bangladeshi culture as their average monthly income is only BDT 13,382 (around \$156.29) according to Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies, "A city rickshaw puller earns Tk 13,382 a month."

With the gradual urbanization and rapid development in the megacities, governments have pushed to eliminate this aesthetic transport from the street (reasoning that the vehicle is one of the major causes of traffic jam and accidents). Dhaka Metropolitan Police Department has already started evicting rickshaws from the heavily congested city streets.

My Personal Story about Rickshaw Art

I chose rickshaw art as a topic for my *GWRJ* article because I wanted to represent my Bangladeshi culture along with its traditions and customs. My assumption is that, much of my audience will be hearing about rickshaws for the first time in their lives and might draw sufficient attention and interest from my readers. A flashback! Back in 2009 I translated an MPhil thesis based on rickshaw art from Bangla to English. The work was by Subrata Das, a Fine Arts professor at the University of Chittagong, Bangladesh. Up until then, I had never thought that even simple rickshaw art could be a subject of research in academia! In my childhood, people around me pulled and used rickshaws as a means of transport. When I was a child, my father's close uncle used to drive a rickshaw, (which, by the way, may or may not have been decorated with art, I now cannot remember). In addition, I remember



Figure 2: The cover page of Prof. Das's MPhil. thesis entitled "Bangladesh's Rickshaw Ornamentation: Diversity in Themes and Styles."

reading a newspaper interview with a professor of literature, who said that even rickshaw painting is *a form of art*. He said that in a postmodern culture there was not so much of a separation between “high art” and “low art.” It was all just art. Most importantly, I learned in my work with the ISU Writing Program that **literate activity** is not confined to simply *writing a text*; in fact, its ranges are wider than that. So, rickshaw art *can be* art, and a rickshaw with art on it can be a text. The calculation is super easy.

Rickshaw painting/art is a day-in day-out text, which is writing-in-the-world and a text that is very useful in daily life. In the next section, I will discuss and analyze rickshaw art with the help of some of the Writing Program’s P-CHAT concepts.

Rickshaw Art as a Genre

The term **genre** is certainly a buzzword in the discussion of literate activities in ISU’s Writing Program. So my fundamental questions are: what is this genre? And why so much fuss about it? Well. At this point, you may be thinking of **genre** as any *category* or *kind* of text that exists in an area or discipline. For example, in Western music pop, band, rock, blues, and jazz are all different genres. In literature: poetry, fiction, prose, drama—these are genres.

However, a rhetorical genre studies definition of “genre” is quite different from the one you may already know about. The ISU writing program offers the following definition of “genre”: A genre can mean any kind of production that it is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable.

As you can probably see, this latter definition is much broader than the former one. Any “production” or text can have the potential to be regarded as a “genre” but the condition is: it should have some general conventions which make it different or unique from other things. Applying this flexible and inclusive definition, I can argue that rickshaw art is a good example of a genre because it has some noticeable conventions with its own distinctive place among numerous other genres in the world. For example, rickshaw art is different from other genres such as truck art, pot/vase painting, wall painting, calendar art, book cover art or more mainstream genres, such as painting or artworks (so-called “high art” pieces, which have their exhibitions in art galleries). But in order to understand this genre better, I want to look more closely at the features that make it distinct from other types of visual genres.

My Genre Research on Rickshaw Art

My genre research comprised a number of activities and procedures. First, to gather preliminary ideas about rickshaw art I contacted Prof. Subrata Das. He was very enthusiastic to hear about my project. What I got from our conversation is that his work investigated the aesthetic, social, political, cultural aspects of rickshaw art and how this otherwise simple style of people's art represents Bangladeshi values and ideologies. Immediately, I understood that his was an example of **content research** which the ISU writing program defines as "expert knowledge about a topic," as opposed to my intended approach, **genre research**, which involves "learning how to create a specific kind of text for a specific kind of situation." However, in spite of our differing approaches, talking with him was, to a great extent, illuminating, as he provided me workable information on how to locate rickshaw artists in my area (Cumilla) to interview. Moreover, he also provided me with some important materials, his thesis and a sample of paintings which he had collected in 2009 for his MPhil thesis.

Bearing the intention of doing **genre research**, I then collected a substantial number of artworks (around twenty-five to thirty); some I got from the abovementioned professor, some I captured with my cell phone from the rickshaws plying on the street, others I have found on the Internet. At the same time, I also watched a number of YouTube videos, read newspaper articles, and saw TV news that featured rickshaw art. Lastly, I also conducted two one-on-one interviews on my topic: one with a rickshaw artist and another with Prof. Das in Bangladesh to better understand this art, its process and production and the other engaging issues that might be of use.

By analyzing the collected works/images of rickshaw art I have attempted to find out its **genre conventions** or **features**, meaning the explicitly recognizable common features and/or deviations (if any) from these. The subject of rickshaw art is numerous, varied and sometimes quite intriguing. Most common of these might include, but is not limited to: cinema posters, landscape, natural sceneries, common rural scene, animal (especially tigers and deer), birds (doves, parrots and pigeons are found very common), religious issues, political leaders and so on. However, human figures take the center stage. The next convention, among others, is the use of extremely bright colors (red is the predominant color). Then the size of paintings is usually bigger to draw the attention of the passengers and commuters on the street. My simple logic is that on the street, passengers are always in a rush and so to catch their attention it's better if the size is bigger and the color is dazzlingly bright. Plus, almost all the pictures bear the name of the artist and

the owner of the rickshaw, often followed by their (often the latter's) phone numbers. For example, artists' names appear like this (in Bangla):

- ‘রফকি আর্ট’; ‘কালাম আর্ট’; ‘আর্ট বাই জামাল’ ইত্যাদি (translated: “Rafiq art”, “Kalam art” or “Art by Jamal” etc.)
- Owner's names appear like this (in Bangla): রোখসানা ট্রেডার্স; খলিল মিস্ত্রি ইত্যাদি (translated: “Rokhsana Traders”; “Khalil Mistri” etc.).

However, I have seen a lot of art work in which an artist's name is missing, but the owners' or company's name is regular or always present. With regards to space allocation, the rickshaw owner predictably exerts more status and importance than the artist. The name of the artist is inscribed in small size in the margin or into the corner of the plate. Moreover, as a chief convention, one- or two-line captions are given to the art. For example, if it's a painting of two praying people, the caption goes like, “Allah Hafeez” or “Allah is Almighty.” If it is a cinema poster, the title of the film appears, though there are many cinema posters which lack this feature. One major convention of rickshaw art as a genre is that the contents are semirealistic and easily correspond to real life as opposed to *expressionistic mode*, which tends to blur the everyday reality. Conversely, some other art form might be inappropriate for use on rickshaws because on the busy city street passengers have no extra time to spare on discovering its inner significance or meaning.



Figure 3: The rickshaw artist Sohag on his canvas creating a cinema poster in his own workshop. Photo credit: Abdullah Al Musayeb, a student of mine in Bangladesh taken by his android mobile.

Use of **multimodality** is another significant convention I have observed. So what does this term mean, really? “**Multimodality** refers to the interplay between different representational modes, for instance, between images and written/spoken word” (Korhonen). Literal scenes, symbolic landscapes, and alphabetic writing—all of these are visible in the art. Much rickshaw art uses visual pictures which are very eye-catching. The captions (in alphabetic writing) are not always present in the genre of this art. Many of the cinema posters have a caption (usually the name of films) while some lack it. Md. Sohag, the rickshaw artist I interviewed, pointed to some works hanging in his workplace, explaining that they were also cinema posters. I looked more closely: a man and a woman; I could not recognize any particular Bangla cinema hero or heroine. Afterwards, he elucidated: this two-figure art has been drawn so many times, so many ways and by so many artists that now it’s quite impossible to know who the “original” hero and heroine were.

Who defines or controls what shall be the subject of the rickshaw art? My interviews and other YouTube sources reveal that this authority is distributed between the two parties: the artist and the transport owner/s. Sometimes the owner/s just bring a banner/poster/calendar to imitate it. Or they just give a casual order saying, “Make me some art; it should be beautiful” without ever giving any exact direction. It gives both freedom and responsibility. In such a case, Sohag said, “we usually do not take such orders, because what if I work my way, and you do not like it? There remains the possibility of a hassle with regards to the quality of work. Still, if you insist, possibly I will take the order and then draw something as I like.” Some customers just say, “Two-faces.” Sohag’s **uptake** of this would be that he was required to draw two human faces, probably the hero and heroine of cinema posters. Other drivers might say, “Make me a pair of doves or pigeons.” This illustrates how the **production** of the art on the rickshaw can include a power dynamic that is distributed between the owners and artists, and the owners mostly define what will be the content of a particular art. However, this is not always a *straightforward, stable or one-way dialogue*. With regards to the use of **tools**, say, aluminum sheet (used as canvas) brush, color, space, the artist has the upper hand despite his constrained freedom of choice. He manipulates the power of fixing color combinations and the allocation of space and brightness and lightness.

As a subject, cinema posters are very common and popular in this art form. In fact, in the 1970s and 1980s the cinema poster genre was at the peak of popularity and its social acceptance was monumental. This is, I assume, due to the golden era of Bangla cinema. Blockbuster films were made at the time and images of heroines were accepted into wider social

space, including poor, lower middle- and middle-class Bangladeshis. People usually frequented cinema halls to watch such films with family and friends. With the advent of modern technology, first CD/DVD player and later computers, Internet, YouTube, and of course social media, people gradually stopped going out to halls and got the entertainment within their home place. In addition, with the final blow of digital culture, you got exposed to movies from across the world: Hindi, English, and Chinese etc. As a result, cinema as an entertainment receded because other contesting modes and ways evolved. With that, it had an influence on rickshaw art (cinema posters). Once, artists gathered cinema posters from the nearby halls to work on. And owners often also brought posters to them for imitation. So as a topic, cinema posters are rarely drawn in art now, Sohag confirmed to me. Here we have the occasion to see how one media affected another one. As the commercial films failed to draw an audience, and the cinema halls have been turned into other establishments such as shopping centers and office buildings, this has had a negative impact on rickshaw art with the gradual dwindling of it.

The Artist and His Antecedent Knowledge, and His Audience

When a rickshaw owner just says, *Make a beautiful art for me*, the artist already knows what he is required to do: the work will be very bright, colorful and very eye-catching. When inquired as to what color makes an art “beautiful,” Sohag told me, “Red.” He added that red is the color that is dominant in rickshaw art. Yet, keeping red in the center, they also use other bright colors, such as green, yellow, orange etc. While choosing/fixing the color combinations, the artist always remains careful that the art looks “gorgeous” and “bright.” That is to say, the rickshaw owner (as **audience**) is ever present in his mind. When I asked, ‘why do you give importance to bright colors?’ He replied with a smile, ‘Because all artists do so; and the clients as well as rickshaw pullers love it.’ So Sohag’s **antecedent knowledge** (I mean, the information or ideas that one brings into an actual work at the time of performing it) which mainly derived from other peers in his vocation (i.e. rickshaw painting) helped him steer into his artwork. At the same time, he also has to give importance to the demands of his customers as his income depends on the vocation of painting.

Rickshaw Art is also a Transcultural Text? Cool. Why Not?

It is true that rickshaw artists from Bangladesh mainly create work on subjects rooted in Bangladeshi culture, but culture is always changing and in a flux.

Chronotope

A term employed by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) to refer to the coordinates of time and space invoked by a given narrative; in other words to the ‘setting’, considered as a spatio-temporal whole. (Oxford Reference).

The imagination of a stable, fixed culture is just a myth. Therefore, we see that other cultural phenomena also figure in rickshaw paintings. In my research, I’ve found a work which featured Barack Obama and his family members. It’s modeled on cinema posters, Obama-Michele (hero-heroine) and other characters (see figure 4). It’s a great example of the artist mediating and experimenting with rickshaw art (cinema poster). It’s also

transcultural literacy. The artist’s signature is given on the top right-hand corner with the year (2014) when the US president just started the year of his second term. The work makes sense quite well if we can make use of the notion of “**chronotopes**” offered by Mikhail Bakhtin. Should we give a pause to see what this peculiar term is?

Any literate practice is bound to time and place. Because more than any other president Mr. Barack Obama caused a tremendous stir of hope, aspirations and dreams not only for African Americans and other marginalized groups in the US, but also for people in other countries, including Bangladesh. So when a rickshaw artist (usually poor, marginalized and illiterate/semiliterate) draws Obama under a different context (Bangladesh), it’s highly significant as it crosses cultural boundaries and embodies a feeling of solidarity mostly engendered by the press, media and other cultures. I’m also thinking of a big body of print, electronic and other contents manifesting a sympathetic mode to Obama during his first election in 2009.



Figure 4: Caption (in Bangla): “Barack Obama’s Family.”



Figure 5: A cinema poster titled “Nosto Chatro” in Bangla or “A Spoiled Student” in English.

A Bleak Future?

The onslaught of digital painting has had a tremendous toll on the traditional rickshaw painters in Bangladesh. A news report entitled “Rickshaw Painting in Bangladesh” echoes such concerns with evidence and reason. Rajkumar Das, who started his career in this art in the 1950s recalls that rickshaw paintings were very popular, and the demands for artwork were really high. Now it’s a declining story. His two sons share this vocation, but his grandchildren are not coming to it. He says, in a sorrowful tone: “It will not last.”

New Hope!

While the rickshaw artist Rajkumar Das was right in his assertion that rickshaw art is passing its stage of crisis, a dwindling period being under the attack from digital printing, new hopes are also imminent and becoming visible. We have artists whose work has travelled into countries like USA, France, and other parts of Europe, and they mainly depend on foreign clients who have a good taste for this medium of art (“BBC News). Now apart from Mr. Rajkumar, we can hear an alternative story of Dulal Khan who became unemployed in 2018, until he got a call from a new decoration company One Culture. Now he does rickshaw painting on all kinds of home objects from cups to plates to mugs—almost all home commodities. Super interesting, indeed! The director of the company explained that these products are exported to many foreign nations. (“Rickshaw Painting in Home Commodities,” YouTube). This new direction of the rickshaw painting as a genre gives us scope to reflect on time and adaptation with it. With time, the canvas has been replaced; now you get rickshaw art not on a rickshaw but on



Figure 6: Rickshaw art on the school wall, not the back of a rickshaw. Collected from Mr. Sohag.

a plate, mug or vase etc. Still, these new remediated arts are called “rickshaw art!”

Concluding Remarks

Rickshaw art is a genre that negotiates with our understanding of P-CHAT concepts. I have focused on its conventions by conducting genre/P-CHAT research. However, my point is not that those conventions are always stable and fixed. Among others, the last example of adaptation with changed time is a good illustration of how a human’s creativity and power usher him/her into new hopeful directions. Understanding this art form as including multimodal and transcultural texts allows us to think beyond what is normally thought of as a work of art.

Final Note

Expressionism is an artistic style in which the artist seeks to depict not objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse within a person. The artist accomplishes this aim through distortion, exaggeration, primitivism, and fantasy and through the vivid, jarring, violent, or dynamic application of formal elements.

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Akbar Hosain comes from Chattogram, Bangladesh. He is a second year PhD student at ISU. Akbar teaches English literature at Comilla University, Bangladesh. Poetry and translation are his passion. Nature (esp. birds, trees and rivers) helps him to get along.