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## Exploring the Symbolism behind Bhawal Folk Art Forms and their Cultural Meanings

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**ABSTRACT :** *This qualitative study explores the signification and semiotics of Bhawal folk art, an essential aspect of the socio-cultural fabric of the Bhawal region. The research aims to investigate how these artworks reflect religion, customs, and the collective spirit of the community, emphasizing the connection between artistic production and cultural identity. The study employed a qualitative methodology, drawing on primary sources such as paintings, visual arts, recorded accounts from the geriatric community, and documented traditions. Data collection methods included field visits, observations, and archival analysis, complemented by semi-structured interviews and field notes. A semiotic discourse analysis framework was applied to interpret the symbols, recurring themes, and their evolving meanings. Key findings reveal that Bhawal folk art profoundly expresses sacred and religious themes, communal norms and beliefs, and historical narratives, serving as a living archive of the community's identity. Observations indicate that the art forms not only preserve cultural heritage but also foster a sense of collective memory and belonging. The study's implications highlight the importance of cultural conservation through education, policy development, and public engagement. Teaching and curating Bhawal folk art as part of educational initiatives can raise awareness and ensure the sustainability of this rich artistic tradition for future generations.*

**Keywords-** Bhawal folk art, Symbolism, Cultural meanings, Heritage preservation, Bangladesh

## I. INTRODUCTION

For centuries, folk art remains one of the key elements of the cultural and spiritual values of people and societies. *Bhawal* folk art consists of graphics representing people of the *Bhawal* region which gives a glimpse into the socio-cultural context of the people. It is not merely an effective means of creative art that beautifies objects and buildings with its symbols and storytelling Picture but rather as an effective tool for maintaining historical and cultural significance (Chakrabarti, 2018). Knowledge of symbolism in the *Bhawal* folk art is critical in deciphering its use in the formation and representation of cultural identity if a people as well as acting as an archive of areas history. Literature review of previous works done in the context of art forms show that folk art has often been found to hold culturally stored information about a tribe or a community (or groups of communities) (Sen, 2016; Roy, 2020). However, the symbolic features in *Bhawal* art remain neglected in terms of qualitative analysis, and hence, literature is missing in this regard.

To address these two elements or values, the present study seek to attend to the symbolic elements in the sense that the way in which local belief systems and historical archive are documented in the art. Thus this study employed field interviews and visual analysis to decipher meanings that are embedded in these traditional forms. Understanding relations between symbols and the context of art making and display casts light on how *Bhawal* art serves as link to regional identity and the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage. It also aids in the clean-up of such symbolism to enhance programs of cultural conservation and knowledge including the promotion of the integration of these arts to cultural and educational strategies (Das, 2021). This inquiry is interested in not just adding to existing knowledge, but in the enhancement of current endeavors in sustaining the artistic culture of *Bhawal*.

## II. OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY

The goal of this study was to evaluate the presence of cultural references in *Bawal* folk art and whether it was useful or not in cultural memory/identity construction.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW OF THIS STUDY

This paper has revealed that folk art and its message is one of the major factors in cultural studies and in understanding an inheritance passed through generations. In view of this, Chakrabarti (2018) notes that traditional art teaches the society's historical and cultural beliefs and values as a society. His work focuses on the interdependence of art and persona illustrating how often graphic iconography traces the richness of cultural symbolism. To sharpen our understanding of the symbols portrayed in Indian folk art, Sen (2016) shows that artworks containing stylized flora, fauna or mythological beings constitute symbols of the collective cultural or spiritual consciousness. He indeed helps assure himself and readers of their relevance to culture as a means of preserving the existing-social structure within the context of a community. The study should prove useful for identifying similar symbolic motifs in the *Bhawal* folk art. Building on this discussion, Roy (2020) brings visual culture and symbolism associated with the art of South Asia into focus. He claims that folk art serves as the insanity of our communities and fills motifs that record local myths and histories. It helps to give insights into the *Bhawal* art forms due to the similarities between two settings where Roy describes the operation of symbolism actively penetrating the existence of people. Das (2021) has stressed one thing that the folk art must be protected in this regard of modern challenges. His research proves dialectically that the globalization and cultural imperialism are endangering art forms such as *Bhawal* folk art. According to Das it's only through educational programs and community preservation efforts so as to ensure that the arts

continue to remain culturally and socially relevant, a stance that perfectly fits the current study intention to enhance cultural literacy.

Art and its beginnings: Mallick (2019) explores about why art forms change and/or develop and whether socio-political developments influence art. Analyzing transformations in the American folk art, his approach identifies discursive shifts that may occur but primary signifying motifs are preserved by external agents. This observation is helpful in studying the probable changes that can occur in the future to *Bhawal* art while assimilating its symbolic meaning fully. In concerning with the facts about the symbolic meanings of folk art, Chatterjee (2017) still pays close attention to the importance of oral histories. Conducting interviews and does participatory observation Chatterjee studies how certain narratives which were transmitted throughout the generations are embodied in artworks. This constitutes the framework through which the present study adopts oral histories to explain meanings of symbols in *Bhawal* art. Basu (2015) explains how community participation in art creation supports affirmations of Community identity and cultural continuity. His research approvingly highlights the dynamic nature of symbols within art, which become further meaningful as they pass through the social practice of interpretation. This communal aspect is in agreement with *Bhawal* folk art whereby the keeping of knowledge as well as practices are spread. Mukherjee (2022) has described some of the difficulties of maintaining a cultural identity in today's idea of education. He strongly supports the idea of including folk art in educational programs to develop the understanding of the meaning incorporated in art. It underpins the present study's suggestion that education policy can assist in the conservation of *Bhawal* art. Sarkar (2018) discusses the subject of symbols related to the rural festivals and rituals arguing that the artistic representations incorporate elements of rituals that play the important role in the particular community. His work explains the relation art has with local culture and traditions that can be used to dissect and analyze all the *Bhawal* art to mean ritual and spiritual. Gupta (2020) emphasizes that visual analysis is an indispensable device for decoding art symbolism. Decoding the use of color, shape and layout we can disclose the meanings hidden into the piece of art. The strength of this analytical strategy is reflected in this present study where visual analysis has been employed as a primary tool for analysis.

#### IV. THEORY APPLIED IN THIS STUDY

The epistemological framework for this study is found in cultural semiotics because it explains that art is a system of symbols through which convey cultural and social meanings. Folk art like the *Bhawal* art is a signifying practice wherein signifiers are anchored from the strictly visual semiotic to shared folk beliefs and culture of the communities (Sen, 2016). This aboutness is rooted in Jünger's theory that the symbols within folk art represent collective memory and identity and are way to retell culture, and transfer it from generation to generation (Roy 2020). Semiotic analysis is employed in this work to demystify these symbols and understand their part to play in contributing to the maintenance of cultural legacy and reiteration of folkloric traditions.

#### V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

The present research used a cultural semiotic qualitative paradigm to uncover the logos embedded in the *Bhawal* folk art. Data gathered through field visits to the *Bhawal* region used participative observation and semi structured interviews with the artists, community members, and art historians. Original photographic examples of *Bhawal* folk art were captured for close analysis or documentation. Identifying patterns, narrative motifs, and additional information, the semiotic analysis framework that Chakrabarti (2018) and Roy (2020) suggested was used. This included evaluating the ways these signs provided

information about the groups' common conception, normative expectations, as well as the community history. Secondary historical data about the art form's historical background were also collected through archival analysis. Qualitative findings from interviews, visual analysis and archival research were analyzed thematically in order to develop an appreciation of the role of *Bhawal* art in cultural continuity.

## VI. FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY

### Findings from Interview

Interviews using semi structured questions were taken from 20 participants included artists, art historians of Bhawal area and the local elders. The topics of the discussions focused on the meaning of symbolism in folk art, especially that from the *Bhawal* region, as well as the roots and conservatism of the art. Local artists said that repetition of motifs decorated with lotus foot, animals and intricate geometric patterns are based on storytelling and their faith. They said that the motifs convey meaning of purity, endurance and divine shield. Art historians associated these signs to other cultural and historical contexts in order to identify the connection to the collective representatives' beliefs and past events. Members from the elders provided examples of how such symbols were used in dissemination of ethical practices and as records of past events. The interviews show that *Bhawal* folk art contains the sacred, the spiritual, and the communal memories. Recurrent such as the sun and the river were seen as life and cycle imagery relevant to the farm-oriented society of the area. These artworks were presented by participants as generations' links and as a means of strengthening people's common values. These included cultural diplomacy whereby folk art particularly that of *Bhawal* was presented as a dovetail between the spiritual, history and environmentalism. They also discussed the way *Bhawal* folk art could be incorporated in school and college curriculum to promote our cultural values, to preserve our cultures for the future generation to come.



### Findings from Visiting and Observation

Some of the community centers, temples and other cultural centers where artworks were found in the *Bhawal* region were visited during the field study. Speaking with local artists and people in the community brought out the importance of these art works in purposes of spiritual and art identity. Pictures stated themes that can be considered as critical to the society in terms of social and cultural importance for the members of the community.

The image illustrates a sculptor at work trying to perfect his piece on clay probably a piece with multiple human like figure sculptures. The work of art addresses existential themes HS, in terms of people's feelings and how they relate to each other. This creative process focuses on the intersections of arts and craft, aesthetics, as well as the folklore of *Bhawal*.



This sculpture shows a small group of human figure coming out or encircling what seems like destroyed architecture; hence, may symbolize the fight and/or survival of humankind. The manner in which people are arranged indicates togetherness in the middle of confusion and thus depicts the cultural-belief and -history of the *Bhawal*. It forefronts the relationship between the occurrences of people and the dynamics of social transformation of the area.

This bright painting depict the countryside with the green lands in the foreground, trees in the far background and tall palm trees in the middle under the red and blue background. Such an interaction of the shades is an indication of coexistence of the natural and the man made and the

location of the activity in Bhawal region where nature is an intrinsic aspect of the people's identity.



Cultural tourism activities involved physical assessments of main cultural informing sites in Bhawal area, which helped expose strong link between art and communal self-definition. Watching a sculptor sculpt chick figures from the clay, the creation of art work was remarkably coming out with a spirit of endurance as well as the togetherness of a nation in face of a social ordeal. The fragmented structure in the sculpture was to indicating the notion of strength in togetherness in times of confusion. Further, there were lively paintings of countryside which depicted the perfect balance of nature- man duality that Bhawal possessed since being an agricultural area. Discussions with local artists revealed how these artworks build and support spiritual and artsy selves. Altogether, elements listed above confirmed the community's eagerness to

maintain the cultural stories and the vision of shared social experience through the art.

## VII. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Cultural semiotic analysis of Bhawal folk art of this study indicates that it is replete with symbolism and thus has important cultural implications. Thematic synthesis done along with interviews and field notes analysis, coupled with the literature review, shows that the Bhawal art is culturally communicative and carries on regional traditions and belief systems, and regional memory (Chakrabarti, 2018; Roy, 2020). It has echoed how, as indicated in the semi-structured interviews, values that are associated with lotus flowers, animal figures, and religious motifs symbolize purity Justus'; resilience; and spirituality Justus' respectively. This strengthens Sen's (2016) observation that motifs in folk art represent societal memory patterns as well as bear extremely significant roles in sustaining Indian cultural memory. This way the community elders' storytelling was in parallel with Chatterjee's (2017) call for the incorporation of storytelling into the art symbolism. Their own fates represent links between two time periods: they proved that art preserved traditions. Observations of the field also supported the conclusion that these signs are not merely clichés but are rather an ongoing conversation between the learned and the current (Basu, 2015). Taking a look at the Bhawal art displayed in temples and art museums supports Mallick's (2019) propositions that folk art changes to some extent with time and therefore, different generations understand different meanings from the art. This adaptation gives evidence about the stability of Bhawal art in changing socio-political situations.

The results share Das's (2021) understanding that the maintenance of folk art demands specific educational and efforts on preservation. The thematic study showed how themes like sun and river symbolize life and continuity reflecting the social values of the Bhawal art in relation to the environmental and the spiritual world. Sarkar (2018) also based his study on examining the relationship between urban folk religion and culture through festival and rituals that symbolize them. This study benefitted from Gupta's (2020) proposal that Visual Analysis as a method that was useful in decoding art symbolism. Consequently, it was possible to demonstrate that repetition reveals symbols that depict spiritual and social significance compassing the communal identity. This research method ratified that Bhawal art is a semiotic mediator, agreeing with the existing theory that art335 conveys complex social and cultural signs and symbols (Sen, 2016; Roy, 2020). This work shows that Bhawal art served as cultural memory in a number of ways. Validity of the art form to support the region's memory and recall about collective culture and ethos is supported by the convergence of literature, interview response, and field observation. This raises the need for embracing such art forms for younger generations as suggested by Mukherjee, (2022) so that appreciation of their representation is enhanced. Therefore, findings of this study validate the existing call for policy and educational interventions for incorporating Bhawal folk art into the mainstream cultural and educational ethos to enhance cultural heritage literacy and preserve ICA (Das, 2021).

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This study strongly defied the extent to which *Bhawal* folk art is culturally important as well as carrying numerous hidden symbolic representations, especially in relation to the area's culture, religion and history. The study shows that these art forms serve as the means for visual storytelling, illustration of beliefs and memories. For this reason, a significant investment should made to incorporate *Bhawal* art into learning and policy platforms so that its material can be protected for future beneficiaries.

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