

**When Memes Become Revolution: Facebook Political Memes as Postmodern Folk Art in
Bangladesh's July 2024 Uprising.**

By

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Declaration

I hereby declare that

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Abstract

This thesis examines Facebook political memes from Bangladesh's July 2024 quota reform movement and uprising. It sees these memes as postmodern digital folk art that shaped how people experience and remember politics. This thesis uses Jean Baudrillard's simulation, simulacra and hyper reality theory, Henry Jenkins' participatory culture, Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony and other related memes and folklore research. It analyzes 7 image-based memes from Bangladeshi public Facebook groups and pages using multimodal methods. This research shows how memes transform protest, state violence, internet shutdowns and religion into shareable visual jokes. These not only document the events but also create a hyperreal archive of July 2024 events that is more vivid than any news reports. This thesis argues that these memes function as both political commentary and a form of emotional support, and a place where the hegemonic narrative about nation, youth and authority are reinforced, negotiated or challenged. This thesis highlights the importance of the meme culture of the Global South in explaining contemporary digital activism.

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1.Introduction

1.1 Background and context

Over the past decade, social media platforms have become an important tool for communication, accessing the news and engaging with politics. Facebook is one of the most used social media platforms in Bangladesh. Recent reports claim that millions of people of Bangladesh use Facebook for staying connected with each other and with the world. The main users of this platform are young adults and university students. For these users, Facebook is not just a medium to stay connected with each other, but also a way for following current events, discussing public issues, and sharing funny or satirical content about political leaders and events. In this context, memes, image-based piece of content have become a popular way for users to comment and engage as they are easy to make, share and remix. Bradley E Wiggins and G Bret Bower describes that meme are created when spreadable media are remixed and altered.

In July 2024 Bangladesh saw one of the most intense periods of student led protests in the country. The most significant one was the protest against the government job quota system. This protest grew into a nationwide demonstration, and later a large uprising in July. Human rights organizations reported that security forces used excessive measures to stop the protesters. These measures include use of lethal and non-lethal weapons along with mass arrest and attack on students. Government also often restricted the use of internet and social media which raised the question about freedom of expression and the right to information. Despite these restrictions, people shared digital materials like memes, short videos and satirical posts. This helped the protesters to create alternative points of view, offer emotional support and help people understand and remember the events of 2024. Memes are an important part of resistance as *Prothomalo* mentioned “In today's times, highlighting the flaws of society and the mistakes of

political leaders through satire or humour are more effective than direct criticism of a complex and lengthy political statement as part of a long project.”

Internet memes have often been dismissed as just as trivial or purely for entertainment purpose. However, studies in media and communication shows that they are an important part of our culture. Limor Shifman defines memes as, “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which are created with awareness of each other, and are circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by many users.” This definition emphasizes the collective, iterative and participatory nature of memes. Scholars argue that memes are important in political communication. They can mobilize support, ridicule opponents, share information or misinformation. They also create a sense of belonging among like-minded people. Research in folklore and cultural studies suggest memes as a type of digital folklore or modern folk art. They are similar to jokes and stories that people create and share in response to social issues and crises.

Despite the growing interest in political memes in Bangladesh, there has not been much detailed analysis of them. Current studies usually focus on specific topics like Facebook memes about the Rohingya community and how they shape social views and stereotypes. They often overlook important events like the July Revolution of 2024. Journalist and activist have pointed out that rap, memes and graffiti have become a “new political tools.” But there is not enough research acknowledging memes as serious cultural text. This is significant because in a setting with censorship and violence, memes may be the only way young and digitally connected people can share stories, feelings and either accept or contest official accounts of events.

This thesis addresses these gaps by examining the Facebook memes of the July 2024 quota movement and the July uprising. This explores these memes as an important form of

digital folk art and a tool for political discussion. This thesis brings four theories together that are rarely present in a study. First, it uses Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, simulation, and hyperreality. This helps us to understand how pictures and captions can become “copies without originals,” which influences people’s experience of politics more powerfully than traditional news or media. Second, Henry Jenkins’s theory of participatory culture and ideas about convergence and civic imagination are also present here. This thesis argues that creating and sharing memes is part of participatory act where regular users become both producers and consumers of political meanings. Third, this thesis utilizes Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony to examine how memes can either support, challenge or reshape prevailing ideas concerning the state, protest and the justification for violence. Finally, it draws on Shifman, Ryan Miller and other digital folklore studies to view memes as vernacular creative forms that exist in groups of related texts and spread through everyday online interaction.

1.2 Research problem and rationale

Given the context, the main research problem is while Facebook memes have played an important role in how July 2024 quota movement and July uprising were represented, discussed and remembered online, they have not been carefully studied as a cultural artifact that shapes political understanding and the struggle for meaning and power. Most public discussions about these memes are where they are seen just as clever content and a tool for mobilization. But they are rarely examined through the lens of postmodern theory, participatory culture, and cultural hegemony. The absence of research limits our understanding about how digital image culture shapes our political reality. This also shows how consent or dissent are managed within the political sphere of Bangladesh.

Research on internet memes has gradually shifted from seeing them as just a trivial curiosity to recognizing their important role in online culture. Studies have shown that memes can support social movements, influence people about how they view politicians and allow everyday users to comment on complex social issues and political issues in short and humorous ways. However, most of the research focuses on North American or European countries. Global South gets less attention in these studies. Global South needs more studied in digital culture because in this region there are serious issues like authoritarianism, media control and economic struggles that significantly shape digital life. In Bangladesh, Facebook plays an important role in day-to-day communication and culture. The quota movement and the uprising of July 2024 provide a chance to study how political memes function during the time of crisis, repression and shifts in the power dynamic.

Theoretically, there is a gap in connecting different frameworks together. Baudrillard's work on simulation and hyperreality are often discussed in general terms or applied to advertising and consumer culture. However, they are rarely applied to specific Non-Western digital artefacts such as Bangladeshi protest memes. Jenkin's theory on participatory culture is widely used to analyze fan communities and some form of digital activism. Sunhith also agrees with this as the author argues that every political meme attempts to mock the political system. But it is still unexplored in terms of relevance for youth led political meme culture in South Asia. Gramsci's theory about cultural hegemony and counter hegemony are being broadly used in media and popular culture. But it has rarely been used in relation to the complex and highly referential texts that constitute contemporary meme culture. By integrating these views with meme studies and digital folklore, this thesis aims to provide a richer understanding of how Facebook memes influence political struggle in Bangladesh.

1.3 Aim, objectives, and research questions

The main purpose of this thesis is to look at Facebook memes during the period of July quota movement and the July uprising of 2024 in Bangladesh. The memes will be studied to understand how these visual satirical mediums worked as a postmodern digital folk art during the protest. This thesis will also find out how memes helped people to express political ideas, engage in public discussions and negotiate cultural hegemony. To achieve this aim, this thesis will analyze the visual, textual and intertextual meaning of political memes, and try to understand how these memes represent and change our understanding of political events. It uses the simulacra, simulation and hyperreality theories of Jean Baudrillard to interpret these memes. This research also explores how the creation, circulation and interpretation of these memes show creativity and participation of Bangladeshi Facebook users. It will also look at whether the memes maintain, challenge or negotiate cultural hegemony in the context of Bangladesh by looking at memes from both dominant and opposing viewpoints. This research asks several questions like how Facebook political memes in the 2024 quota movement and July uprising acted as a postmodern digital folk art within a broader global memescape of political memes. How do these memes create a simulation and hyperreal representation of political events? How do they shape the users' experience and how do they remember political events? How is participatory culture shown in terms of how users take part in creating, circulating and interpreting these memes? Lastly, how do these memes reinforce, negotiate and challenge cultural hegemony in Bangladesh in a satirical and humorous way?

1.4 Scope and delimitations

This thesis solely focuses on Facebook for analysis. Even though other social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, or X (formerly Twitter) were used to circulate memes during the period of July revolution, Facebook is the only platform that is used in this thesis. This thesis

examines image-based memes including image macros, screenshot with texts and multi panel memes gathered from public groups and pages of Facebook. The time period of these sources date from June 1 to August 31st of 2024. This timeframe captures the escalation of quota movement, the peak of July unrest and the aftermath of the uprising. Though this analysis briefly mentions political memes from other countries, but the main focus remains on Bangladesh.

This research uses a qualitative, interpretive case study approach to explore political memes in Bangladesh. It does not aim to statistically represent all political memes, but focuses on the deep understanding of a select group of memes and their meanings during a selected period of time. This analysis relies on public posts and comment sections of various Facebook groups and pages. These memes are treated as text for multimodal and discourse analysis. This study does not involve any kind of interview or survey. To protect user's privacy, any citation taken from the comment section will be anonymized. Sensitive contents will be handled carefully, especially images showing violence and identifiable individuals. This ensures ethics remain intact during this research. This careful handling of contents shows the study's commitment to understanding the impact of political memes while conducting the research in a responsible and respectful manner.

1.5 Organization of the thesis

The remainder of the thesis is divided into five chapters. These chapters are carefully crafted to address diverse, but interconnected parts of the research. The second chapter is the literature review. This chapter explores relevant research, critical concepts of postmodern media theory, participatory culture, internet memes and digital folklore. This chapter places the current study within the broader framework of existing research, focusing on digital culture in

Bangladesh and global south. It examines how these theories connect and how they help us to understand contemporary digital trends. Chapter three explains the methodology that is used for this research. This research focuses on qualitative case study design. It describes the construction of the corpus, the strategy for selecting research material and the methods to analyze the collected data. This chapter also discusses the ethical considerations regarding the research. This ensures that the research upholds integrity and respect stays intact for the subjects involved. Chapter four is about case studies. This chapter offers a clear analysis of memes related to the July 2024 Quota movement and the July uprising. It provides detailed reading, examines how these memes serve as a way to express and resist political views, and how they resonate with social and political context. Chapter 5 synthesizes the main findings of the research. This chapter summarizes findings related to the research questions and the framework set up earlier in the thesis. This chapter also explains how simulation, participation, vernacular creativity, and hegemonic struggle interplay with each other. It connects these findings to broader issues in digital activism and cultural expression within the context of political movements. Finally, Chapter six concludes the thesis. This chapter concludes the thesis by summarizing its key contributions to the fields of media and cultural studies. This chapter also discusses the limitations of this study, areas that need further research and suggests potential directions for further research. It highlights the importance of understanding digital activism, memes and political context in both Bangladesh and the wider global context. It shows that these elements are important elements that crucial in shaping current socio political discussions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Internet memes and digital culture

Mememes have gone from being seen as a trivial curiosity to being recognized as an important part of today's digital culture. Shifman defines internet memes as a group of digital items that have common things like content, form or message and these items are aware of each other. They are shared, copied and transformed by many users around the world. This definition emphasizes that memes are not an isolated image, but a combination of electric related texts whose meaning depends on patterns of repetition and it varies within the participatory network. Shifman argues that memes encapsulated key aspects of participative work culture which includes remix intertextuality and user driven circulation. This provides available window into broader social and political processes online.

Shifman also argues that memes depend on the active engagement of the of users in modifying and re-framing the content. In her analysis of popular meme genres and case studies she shows how users use appropriate templates to express their personal emotions, social identity and their view on politics. "Gangnam Style" is one of the examples. This study is related to Facebook meme studies because it combines memetic practices as a medium of communication rather than just entertainment. This shift form "just for fun" to becoming a powerful tool in a moment of crisis proves that meme is one of the few ways that citizens use to discuss events and share alternative narratives online.

Other works by Shifman develop the idea about how memes connect the personal experience and public discourse. This helps individuals to connect their own feelings and viewpoints to the wider political narrative. She also mentioned how memes have been used in social movements and election campaigns. In this context, memes work as a tool that connects

people with similar shared symbols and slogans. This literature supports the thesis's decision to view Facebook memes as a meaningful cultural text. This also shows how users in Bangladesh view social and political issues within everyday digital interactions.

In this thesis, I argue that Facebook political memes of Bangladesh's 2024 quota reform movement and July uprising are not just a marginal curiosity. Instead, they are an important tool for young users to express their positions on violence, state narrative and social change.

2.2 Participatory culture, prosumers and memetic ethics

Henry Jenkins's work on participatory culture provides us with a way to understand why and how a meme is created. In *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture*, Jenkins describes participatory culture as an environment with low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement. He also talks about strong support for creating and sharing, informal mentorship and a sense of contribution to the participants that their work actually matters. He also argues about the Web platform 2.0 which enables the participants to actually contribute rather than the older platforms where participants were mostly passive. He mentioned them as active "prosumers" who rework the media content and circulates their own work.

Jenkins and collaborators later explored the connection between participatory culture and participatory politics. This shows how seemingly playful practices like fan fiction, remix videos and sharing memes can provide a way into civic and political engagement. An interview with Jenkins highlights that participation is uneven and influenced by structural inequality. He also mentions about the potential of grassroots media production. When looking at it this way, Facebook meme pages can be seen as space for participatory culture where users can create common visual languages and informally mentor each other by commenting and remixing. They can also sometimes mobilize around social and political issues.

In Bangladesh, Facebook meme groups and pages serves as an informal space, user-ran space, where students and young audience to express their political views. They did this by remixing news images, slogans and global meme templates.

Grant Kien expands on this idea of memes by looking at them as a way of audience behavior which has political and social impacts. In his article “Media Memes and Prosumerist Ethics,” Kien argues that sharing memes as an example of prosumerism. In this practice, the line between creating and consuming becomes blurred. The user becomes solely responsible for the contents and meanings they share. In the age of social media, creating and sharing memes is easy. This has both positive and negative effects. This easy creation and sharing of meme can both help people critique issues but can also lead to harassment, misinformation and spread harmful stereotypes. The balance is crucial for this study. This study not only focuses on the creative folk-art part of Facebook memes, but also on how these memes may normalize or challenge the problematic ideologies. This ethical tension is important in this thesis. Because these memes about the July uprising of Bangladesh can either be used to support the government’s narrative and also can be used to challenge them.

Research on meme culture shows a mix of reactions on this topic. Some studies look at "alt-right" contents to understand the duality of this topic. Study shows that some groups use humor and collective interest to spread extremist ideas and the same method is used to counter these ideas. Together, Jenkins’s and Kien’s work emphasizes that memes play as an integral role in participatory culture in today's world. This participation also has important political and ethical usages. This thesis focuses on everyday Facebook users as active participants whose use of meme contributes to broader cultural and political dynamics.

2.3 Postmodern media theory: simulacra, simulation and hyperreality

Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation is the backbone of the understanding of the postmodern theories and it offers a powerful lens to understanding memes. In the book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard explains that in today's society, filled with mass media and consumer culture, signs do not just point to a reality anymore. These signs become a simulacra, which means copies without originals. Through simulation, these representations shape our experiences and create hyperreality. In this state, it becomes hard to tell what is real and what is just a simulation.

Many modern researchers are using Baudrillard's theory to discuss how digital and social media works. They discuss that the constant flow of images, posts and profiles make this idea even more relevant to this thesis. A recent article titled "Simulacra in the Age of Social Media" argues that social media creates an environment where conspiracy memes and fake news visuals feels more relevant than the real facts. This makes Baudrillard's theory even more relevant in today's context. Features of social media like timeline, algorithm based feeds and "Likes" strengthen the idea that visible engagement and repeated content represents truth and significance.

When we examine Facebook memes through the theoretical framework of Jean Baudrillard, we can understand that many of the meme templates are simulacra. They are considered simulacra because we recognize these templates for their memes, not for their "origin." For example, a still from a movie or an image from newspaper can lose its relevance when it becomes a meme. One photo of Leonardo de Caprio holding a drink glass with a quirky smile has so many memes nowadays that we do not know where this image came from. We do not know the origin of the image, but we remember the memes created from this image. Users do

not follow the origin of the image, instead they use suitable captions to create a completely new meaning for these images. Memes are a thing of participation and constant change. Everyday people from all over the world remix and recreate meme. Every time a meme is recreated, it gets a new “reality.” This creates a complex web of association and meaning. Over time, these memes get a new “reality” which is shaped by the manner they were used, not by their origin. This theoretical framework supports this thesis’s argument that Facebook memes not only show the reality, but also actively help to reshape them. They influence the users to think about various aspects like political issues, personal identity and everyday life.

During the quota movement and the July uprising of 2024 in Bangladesh, political memes changed how people remember the events. These memes shaped how people remember the crisis by often recaptioning the photos of protest, police violence and leaders. This makes Baudrillard’s theory relevant to the thesis.

2.4 Cultural hegemony, ideology and memes

Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony shows us how power operates through culture and everyday life. This is useful to analyze the memes in this context. In his book *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, he explains how hegemony works as a mechanism for the ruling group to secure the consent of the less powerful people. They achieve this by using “common sense.” They use media, institutions and cultural practice to promote their view on the less powerful people and also to manipulate their perception. However, Gramsci states that hegemony is not a fixed state. It is always being negotiated and contested. This indicates that this process of being challenged makes its particular social arrangements appear normal and inevitable. Such an approach is important for analyzing political memes. This shows how light-hearted humor can rationalize existing power or question them.

Recent research applies Gramsci's theory to social media platforms and influencer culture. An article published by *Oxford Political Review* argues that social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram play a major role in creating hegemonic ideals about lifestyle, beauty and success. This often happens in disguise of entertainment or personal branding. The author mentions that even though these contents may seem inspirational and empowering on the surface, they normalize neoliberal values and class hierarchy. Another research done by Laura March's "Dank Memes with Exclusionary Themes," shows how some memes promote exclusionary narratives and strengthens existing power structure, especially about race, gender and sexuality. In Bangladesh, where facebook has become a key space for youth political engagement, political memes about 2024 quota protests offers a robust space to observe how hegemonic narratives about students, nationalism, gender and class are reinforced or challenged through humor and satire.

At the same time, Gramscian analysis of digital culture shows how memes give people the voice to challenge hegemonic ideals. People use memes to satirize political leaders, reveal hypocrisy and highlight marginal groups that are overlooked by the mainstream media. Studies of activist memes campaigns show that funny or ironic images can make it easier for people to engage in politics and can build a sense of community. This works especially well with the marginalized communities and those who are disconnected from formal politics. In this thesis, Gramsci provides a framework to study Facebook memes in Bangladesh, focusing on hegemonic discourses about politics, gender, class and national identity. By looking at semiotic details and user response, the analysis shows how this light-hearted content shapes common beliefs and also challenges them.

2.5 Semiotic approaches to memes

Semiotics is the study of signs and meaning making. It is an important methodological and theoretical tool for analyzing memes. Researchers now see memes as a complex sign system that uses visual and textual elements as well as intertextual resources. One article named “Internet Memes as Internet Signs: A Semiotic View of Digital Culture” uses Peircean and Saussurean frameworks to explain that memes work as sign. The relation of a meme depends on the relationship between signifier (form), signified (concept) and interpretant (audience interpretation) as it circulates online. The author emphasizes that meaning making does not have a fixed formula. It develops through people’s understanding of denotation, connotation and contextual knowledge among the people who participate in this process.

Several studies use semiotics to analyze specific meme genres or case studies. One paper uses Roland Barthes’s concept of denotation, connotation and myth to show how these image macros about how politicians send ideological messages. This paper also demonstrates that memes work as a second-order sign system where simple can convey deeper “myths” about national identity, corruption and leadership. Another study on meme with English and Arabic caption. It combines visual and language analysis to show how humor and social critique appears in different countries and culture. It also highlights how typography, code stitching and cultural reference shape audiences’ understanding of the memes.

Further studies have applied semiotics to analyze typography and intertextuality. Work on “semiotics of typography” in Facebook memes shows that a small change in lettering or layout can show someone’s opinion, group identity or create parody. This reinforces the idea that every design choice behind the creation of a meme is meaningful. One paper combines Saussurean and Barthesian models with intertextuality to show memes use and changes existing texts and

resources. It claims that memes create a “layered meanings” that either challenges or reinforces cultural beliefs. Additionally, a case study of the “Scumbag Steve” meme uses Barthe’s semiology to show how denotative and connotative meaning meanings combine to create myths about irresponsibility and social deviance in today’s culture.

The literature on semiotics provides useful conceptual and methodological tools needed for this thesis. This supports the use of close reading techniques that distinguish between literal description and cultural interpretation. It helps identify relevant codes such as local slang, political symbol or popular cultural references. It also traces how repeated use of the same template creates recognizable sign clusters. By using a semiotics approach, this thesis can systematically unpack how facebook memes in Bangladesh express in-group meaning and group identity. This makes the ideological work visible through humor, visual style and intertextual play.

These semiotic tools will be used to analyze memes in the chapters ahead. Each meme will be looked at to understand at the level of denotation, connotation and myth to reveal the deeper meaning of them.

2.6 Memes as digital folklore and vernacular creativity

Along with semiotic studies, scholars in folklore and cultural studies are increasingly viewing meme as form of digital folklore. An article in *Culture Crossroads* titled “internet memes as a folklore genre” argues that memes are similar to traditional joke and stories. It shows that memes share similar structure, spread in a similar way and serve a similar social purpose. The author analyzed Latvian student meme and discovered that even though these memes are circulated online, they show reflect the same theme and stories that student folklore follows. For example, jokes about exams, teachers and campus life. The study concludes that internet memes

can be seen as “digitally distributed witty multimodal reports” that creates a new type of folklore. This genre is connected to modern technology but is still connected to older traditions. Although these examples are based on European context, the same logic applies to Bangladeshi facebook memes. In this context, jokes about exam, corruption, police violence or heroic student act as local folk stories told in digital form.

Another study on digital folklore shows how people continue to express their creativity online. A BYU master’s thesis, “Memes: Folklore on the Internet,” argues that meme genres like LOLCats works as a form of vernacular communication. This helps people to share cultural experiences. They use group-specific language like LOLSpeak and rely on humor to express and maintain folk practices. Simon Bronner’s broader reflection on meme shows that internet has become a crucial part in creatin, preservation and transformation of folklore among “digital natives.” It allows users to creatively relate their experiences through narratives and images that address ambiguity and social anxiety. More recent research on Chinese digital folklore explores how platform specific genres of memes and jokes develop form vernacular creativity which shows both lasting elements and changes over three decades of online culture. During the political crisis, such as the July uprising of 2024, people used vernacular creativity to express their political view. Users used humor and storytelling to cope with the feelings of fear, anger and hope when faced with oppression.

Digital folklorists see memes as a tool for building identity and establishing boundaries. Looking at a recent dissertation on queer community, the author argues that memes help the LGBTQIA+ community to articulate shared values, aesthetics and political views. They also define who belongs to the group and who does not, using what the author calls “boundary-marking memes.” This represents Shiffman’s and others’ observation that memes often depend

on knowledge specific to a group and they can exclude those who are not familiar with the relevant cultural codes. For this present thesis, the folklore literature supports the idea that Facebook memes are a type of digital folk art. They are created by ordinary people, circulated in communities and rely on repetition and variation to maintain shared narratives and identity.

The concept of “Vernacular Creativity” helps us to understand digital storytelling and user-generated content. According to scholars, online platform enables everyday users to take the “textual idiom” from mass media and repurpose them for their personal expression. This process enables many users to share their personal experiences to become a part of public culture. In meme culture, we see this creativity when user remix media images, global meme templates with their local slang, jokes and concerns. This thesis draws on these insights to explore Bangladeshi Facebook political memes as a part of wider digital folklore and vernacular creativity. This does this by looking at their unique cultural and political context. Consequently, this thesis treats Bangladeshi facebook political memes as form of digital folk art. Their repeated templates, inside jokes and boundary making practices help to shape community membership and shared meanings of the July uprising.

2.7 Bangladesh, Facebook, and the 2024 quota reform movement

In Bangladesh, Facebook is deeply connected to everyday life, especially among the young people. According to Kemp, Bangladesh has roughly 60 million users. This is not only a social space, but also a place for debate and sharing opinions. This includes political views and debate. The 2024 July student-led quota movement grew into July uprising marked by violence, human right violence and internet shutdown. Despite government restrictions, people used memes, rap, graffiti and other creative forms to express their dissent, criticize authority and share alternative narratives. In this context, facebook political memes of 2024 quota movement and

July uprising offer an important scope for analysis because they combine global meme style with local cultural traditions into highly shareable content in national crisis.

2.8 Synthesis and conceptual framework

The literature review in this chapter shows that memes are not just marginal curiosities. They are an important part of digital culture. Shifman and other scholars describe memes as a group of related digital items. Their meaning comes from repetition, variation and user driven circulation. Folklore scholars view memes as a type of modern digital folk art. Jenkins's theory of participatory culture, combined with Kien's notion of prosumer ethics show that the people who create memes are active participants, not just observers. Their playful remixes and comments have real impact in political and ethical context. In Bangladesh, particularly during the 2024 quota reform movement and the July uprising, these theories help us to understand memes as vernacular text. Young users use them to collectively narrate, joke about and argue about national crisis.

Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation offers a postmodern way for us to understand how memes can work as a simulation of the political reality. In this view, the line between real event and their online version becomes blur. When people experience these protests through images, screenshots and memes in social media, these memetic versions can feel more real than reality. This creates a hyperreal version of politics. Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony helps us to analyze how these memes can either support or challenge dominant "common sense" about students, authority and nationalism. This shows how humor and satire can be used for both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic purposes.

Semiotics and digital folklore approaches connect these theories to analyze specific Bangladeshi political memes. Semiotics describes these memes as a part of a sign which by

studying, reveals their meanings, ideas and ideologies. Folklore studies highlight how group identity and common narrative is created by using repeated template, inside joke and shared practices.

By bringing these together, this thesis treats facebook political memes from July 2024 quota movement and uprising as digital postmodern folk artifact shaped by participatory culture. These memes both simulate political events and act as a space where cultural power is being reinforced or challenged.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive case study approach to examine Facebook political memes related to the 2024 quota reform movement and the July uprising in Bangladesh. The goal is to understand how these memes construct meaning about protest, violence and national identity, rather than to measure their frequency or apply finding to all users. A case study method is appropriate because it focuses on a specific event like one specific event, one specific event or one specific time frame. It allows detailed attention to context and nuance.

Using methods from multimodal discourse and semiotics, the analysis treats memes as a complex system of sign where image, text, layout and intertextual reference come together to express stance and ideology. This framework is built on the theories of Baudrillard's simulation, Jenkins notion on participatory culture and Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony and views on memes as a form of contemporary folk art.

3.2 Research site, corpus and sampling

3.2.1 Research site: Facebook in Bangladesh

Facebook was chosen as the research site because facebook is one of the most widely used social media sites in the context of Bangladesh. Most of the people of all ages use facebook, especially university students and young adults. Many use facebook as a social space, news source and informal political debate. During the 2024 quota reform movement and July uprising, public pages and groups were important because they provided updates, testimonies and humorous and satirical posts about the protest when the authorities occasionally restricted internet and social media access.

3.2.2 Corpus: memes and timeframe

This study looks at 7 image-based political memes, which were gathered from public Bangladeshi Facebook pages and groups. The memes include image macros with overlaid text, photoshopped news photographs, screenshots with added comments and simple multi-panel memes. Each selected memes directly or indirectly connects with the quota reform movement and the July uprising. These memes show state violence, political leaders, national symbols or widely recognized slogans related to the events of 2024.

The timeframe of the selected memes is 1st June to 31st August of 2024. These memes cover the escalation of the quota reform movement, the peak of the July revolution and the immediate aftermath. This focus ensures that the memes this thesis analyzes directly relate to unfolding of the protests and how people reacted to them. This thesis will also add some more memes from recent global political event to help us understand the broader “memescape.” This will help us to understand that memes are not just confined to a country or to a specific group of people; it is a global concept.

3.2.3 Sampling strategy

This thesis uses a purposive sampling strategy. First, this thesis identifies some public groups and pages through Facebook and online search that were active during the quota reform and July uprising. Media reports were also used to find meme creators and online activists. This study includes pages and groups that mainly posted memes in Bengali and English languages. For Bangladeshi audience, memes based on Bengali and English language had noticeable engagement during the quota movement and July uprising.

This study focuses on the period between 1st June to 31st August. Image-based memes were selected based on these criteria:

1. Must have to be published between 1st June to 31st August.
2. Addresses national politics, mentions the quota reform movement or the July uprising.
3. Were designed and circulated as meme. Must have to have humor and satirical element.

Not just general news with neutral captions.

From the posts, the memes that have maximum thematic and formal variation. This includes different deceptions like students, police, leaders, martyrs, national symbols and many more. It also shows stances like supportive of the state or the criticism of the state, along with ambivalent or darkly humorous memes. This maximum-variation sampling approach is quite common in qualitative research. It is famous because it seeks interpretive richness rather than statistical representativeness.

3.3 Data collection procedures

Data collection happened in three steps. First, a target list of Facebook pages was made. Then it was made sure that the content was publicly accessible, meaning that anyone with a Facebook account can view the post. Second, the list was scrubbed to make sure the posts fit the

timeline that this thesis targets. Posts that met the criteria were opened and the image was saved or a screenshot was taken. It was ensured that the meme and its message remain intact in this process. Third, the chosen memes were renamed based on what message they carried and what type of meme they were. All the memes were stored in a folder for easier access. A list was made to keep track of the basic information like URL, page or group name, date, engagement metrics (like reactions, comments, and shares), primary languages, and a brief description of the memes. For the memes that were chosen for detailed analysis, notes were taken about the comment feed and the caption. This shows the support the meme got from the audience. Comment section gave us an idea of whether the meme was able to reach the targeted audience, successfully conveyed the message or not and if it criticized or supported the movement. Mainly memes from publicly available pages or groups were collected and some memes were collected during the July uprising period.

3.4 Data analysis

3.4.1 Analytic approach: multimodal semiotic analysis

The collected memes were analyzed using multimodal discourse and semiotic analysis. This method looks at how different semiotic elements like image, text, color, layout, typography and intertextual elements work together to construct a meaning. Based on the work by Kress and van Leeuwen and by Cannizzaro on memes as internet signs, this analysis treated meme as a mixed text where visual and verbal elements are tightly interwoven. This approach is consistent with the literature review which mentioned that memes work through layered denotations, connotation and myth making. This often relies on insider cultural knowledge. It allows the thesis's theoretical ideas to function at the level of sign system and interpretive practices.

3.4.2 Coding stages

The analysis follows three iterative coding stages: descriptive, semiotics and theoretical.

In the descriptive coding stage, the study records denotative information of the memes. This includes who or what appears in the image, what the caption or overlay text says and which color, layout and recognizable templates are used for making the meme.

During the semiotic coding stage, the focus shifts to understanding connotation and the theme of the meme. The analysis looked at how combination of images and text signals emotion like anger, grief, mockery and many more. It also examines narratives like heroic resistance, tragic sacrifice, corrupt power and stereotypes about students, politicians and “the mob.” Choices in typography and visual emphasis were also considered as meaning- making resources.

In the third stage, theoretical coding, the conceptual framework from Chapter 2 was used. For each selected meme, the analysis asks how it worked in a simulation of a political reality. This uses the work of Baudrillard’s theory, like how a meme version of an event became more recognizable than the original. We looked at the forms of participatory culture and vernacular creativity by Jenkins and research on digital folklore, and how they appear in remixes and audience responses. The study also considers whether the meme reinforces, negotiates, or challenges the dominant “common sense” about students, authority and the nation. This supports Gramsci’s theory about hegemony and counter-hegemony. These stages influenced one another rather than proceeding in a strict sequence. As Sunhith mentioned in *Semiotic analysis of political memes on Facebook pages* that reality is not a static idea. It is based on a shared set of meanings.

3.5 Ethical considerations and limitations

3.5.1 Ethical considerations

This study only uses publicly available Facebook content. It does not access private profiles, closed groups or restricted posts. When captions or comments are mentioned, the username and profile picture are anonymized or omitted to protect user privacy, even though the content is public. The images used are chosen carefully and the study makes sure that no memes depicting violence or identifiable victims are shown. These materials are described instead of being directly shown out of respect for those affected. No meme creator or users were contacted directly. The study's focus is on the textual and visual properties of the materials rather than identifying individuals.

3.5.2 Limitations

There were several limitations present during the collection of materials. The data was collected through purposive sampling from a limited number of pages and groups. That's why it does not statistically represent all the political memes produced in Bangladesh during 2024. Algorithmic filtering and the researcher's own network may affect which pages and posts were visible during data collection. Deleted or hidden content could not be recovered. As this research focuses on image-based Facebook memes, that's why other platforms like X, TikTok and many other platforms were excluded. Finally, without interviews or surveys, we can only guess audience interpretation and political effects from the artifacts themselves and observable engagement. These limitations are acknowledged in the research. These limitations do not undermine the thesis's goal to provide a rich, theoretically grounded understanding of how a specific set of Facebook memes represented and challenged the 2024 quota reform movement and July uprising.

4. Overview of the meme corpus

4.1 Media blindness to state violence: “I’m gonna pretend I didn’t see that”



Figure 1-Media Blindness to State Violence

This meme was taken from the facebook page named “Wittigenz.” This meme consists of a black and white photograph of a man wearing dark sunglasses and slightly smiling as he sits at a piano. The top text is in Bengali saying "শত শত শিক্ষার্থীর উপর পাশবিক আক্রমণ* অধিকাংশ বাংলাদেশী নিউজ চ্যানেলঃ," which translates to “Brutal attacks on hundreds of students”; Most Bangladeshi news channels:”. The bottom text is in English and says “I’m gonna pretend I didn’t see that.” This composition uses a global, well-known meme template where a blind or uninterested man jokes about not seeing something. In this context, this was used to show the ineffectiveness of the mainstream media during July 2024. This expresses the message

of how mainstream media perceived silence or selective vision regarding police and pro-government violence against student protesters. The semiotic contrast between the serious phase about “brutal attack” and the man’s relaxed expression show the underlying moral dissonance between the suffering of the students and media indifference.

When looking through Baudrillard’s theory, we can see how this meme shows what is shown and also what is refused presentation. The reality of injured bodies and state brutality is replaced by the blank gaze by the media figure who chooses to intentionally look away. This meme reveals a hyperreal media space where reality is not what happened, but what was allowed to be shown on the screen. By labeling “most Bangladeshi news channels” as someone who “pretends not to see,” the meme suggests that televised reality is an active simulation that actively hides certain event rather than simply mirroring them. The meme, as it circulates on Facebook, becomes an alternative simulation that indirectly brings the missing violence back into public awareness by criticizing its absence. From a participatory culture perspective, this is a very good of example of how memes are created by day-to-day users. An everyday Facebook user used this meme to criticize the media by using a visual media, not writing an editorial of formally written text in the print media. The meme-maker borrowed a global reaction meme template, added Bengali text about “hundreds of students” facing violence and posts it in group where everyone can like, share and remix it. The blend of Bangali (to describe the violence and name Bangladeshi news channels) and English (the catchy phrase) is an indicator of the bilingual vernacular of many young users, and indicates both belonging to the global meme culture and placing the content firmly in local politics.

The cultural hegemony concept by Gramsci assists in explaining the ideological interests of such humor. In hegemonic discourse mainstream news channels would put themselves in the

position of neutral, professional reporters about what is happening in the country; by suggesting that they are “pretending not to see” when the state or its allies attack students, the meme places them in the ruling block, which gains consent by refusing to show what could outrage. It is therefore a counter-hegemonic meme: the fans are challenged to acknowledge media complicity and take a skeptical approach to official versions of the story, by making a serious charge more palatable and easier to take emotionally. Meanwhile, the template is part of a larger collection of digital folklore: most viewers will have encountered versions of this image to joke about not wanting to know uncomfortable truths about their own lives on the one hand, but on the other hand, the meme is a boundary marking joke indicating that a group understands as much about global conventions of memes as much about local failures of media. The creator takes part in vernacular creativity by using a recognizable reaction image with context-specific Bangla text, using mass media and internet language to explicitly form a specifically Bangladeshi critique of media coverage during the July 2024 crisis.

4.2 Exclusion and intensifying protest: “Everyone gets it, I don’t”



Figure 2-Failed Calculations of Fear

This meme was taken from the facebook page named “Wittigenz.” This meme originates from an old Bengali film. In the picture we can see a man wearing dark sunglasses, with a moustache and he is at the middle of the meme. Another man is in the foreground of the meme whose face we cannot see. The man in the main frame is mentioned as “ছাত্র হত্যাকারী” (“student killer”). The picture has a grainy and a style that can be seen in older movies. Across the top of the template, the caption is “করতে চাচ্ছে অর্ধেক, হচ্ছি আমরা দ্বিগুণ” (“They are trying to make us half; we are becoming double”). This is from the students’ point of view. At the bottom another text appears that says “সবার অঙ্ক মেলে, আমার অঙ্ক মেলে না” (“Everyone’s

math works out; mine doesn't"). This is from the killer's point of view. The entire structure is characterized by a frightening figure of an aggressor, a numerical image of domination and expansion, and an everyday comedic quip of miscalculations. This combination transforms a bloody scene into a blackly comic remark of the unanticipated consequences of terror.

Semiotically, the meme is about a confrontation between the "student killer" and the "we" of the protestors. The man's sunglasses and the posture in which he is standing show toughness and impunity which reminds us of the police, party cadres and hired thugs. The caption represents the situation of the students. The caption represents how the ruling party and their supporters are trying to "halve" the number of the students to fail the protest by killing them or intimidating them. But the students are not that cowardly. They are becoming even braver after seeing their companion fall. They are becoming double in number instead of halving. As mentioned by Md. Idris Ali and Ziaul Hoque in their paper that the spread of news and information of brutality make people angrier and encourage them to engage in the protest. The bottom caption is the representation of the frustration of the "student killer." He is frustrated because no matter how much he tries to intimidate the students, they are not falling back. They are becoming more and more united as the killers are trying to intimidate them. Literally, the killer's strategy is failing in front of their eyes. Here the plan backfires. The strategy of fear is not working. The armed perpetrators are not reaching their objective. The bottom caption is the reflection of this frustration. If we explain this using the Gen-Z term, the killers' "math isn't mathing."

By using Baudrillard's theory, we can understand how this still form a Bangali movie becomes a simulacrum of state or pro-government violence. This meme does not expect the viewer to remember the movie or remember what the role of the person in the movie was. The

image is a generic image of “student killer” that was made by combining many real actors and incidents into one easy-to-share sign. The calculation, kill some to scare of others is not a real policy. It is a hyperreal scenario that people believe happened behind the violence. By mocking the script, the students created a counter simulation where the students created the narration, not the perpetrators. The students determined the final outcome; the number grew instead of shrinking. This aligns with the report that social media shared stories of martyrs and visual testimonies that helped sustain mobilization despite fear.

From a participatory-culture perspective, this meme shows how Bangladeshi Facebook users’ remix and reuse existing cultural material to create a completely new medium to criticize local political incidents. The template and the line “everyone’s maths works out except mine” is not something new. This template has been in use for many years. Previously, this was used in a non-political way. But when the “student killer” was added, it became a sharp criticism of the attackers of July 24. This shows that this meme was a product of the everyday user of Bangladesh who used this template to show their courage and bravery against the oppressive government. As mentioned by Bradley E Wiggins and G Bret Bower that Internet memes exist as artifacts of participatory digital culture.

According to Gramscian theory, this meme challenges the state and pro-government narrative that violence is an effective tool for control and the legitimacy of using violence by law-enforcement agencies. Official statements often imply that harsh measures will “restore normalcy” by discouraging protest. But the meme, on the contrary, demands that the movement is made stronger through repression since it creates more corpses on the streets. By labeling the responsible “student killer” and ridiculing his math skills, the theme delegitimizes violence and questions the legitimacy of the narrative that violence brings obedience. This piece of digital

folklore relies on a shared understanding between the film and its dialogue and the context of July 2024. This shows how Bangladeshi viewers as an insider understood the memes connection with the movie and the protest narrative. In this way, the meme tells a story about resilience: whenever "they" try to bring the students down, "we" come back even stronger.

4.3 “Do less drama”: satirizing elite grief over property



Figure 3-Elite Grief Over Property

This meme was taken from the facebook group named “নাটক কম করো পিণ্ড.” The meme is a huge painted cut-out of an old woman in a white sari with black and red border, painted in cartoon style. She holds a tissue to her nose, her eyes squeezed shut and cheeks wet, suggesting intense crying. The hand that is touching the tissue is held such that one of the fingers sticks out, almost as in an obscene gesture, and her other hand, close to her chest, is also in the shape of a V which is typically a sign of victory or peace. At the head of the cut-out, in large red

Bangali character, is the statement, “নাটক কম করে পিও!--Do less drama, please! This figure is defined by the user context as a satirical image of the former prime minister, who wept after going to a ruined metro station during the uprising even though she did not go to hospitals where injured and dead protesters and bystanders had been taken.

Semiotically, the meme shows a grieving woman with the textual accusation of “drama.” The large teardrops, crumpled tissue and a melodramatic facial expression look more like acting for a soap opera rather than real mourning. The text instructs her to “do less drama.” This implies that her emotion is insincere and misdirected, as she cried for the infrastructural damage, not for the injured protesters. Her ambiguous hand gesture, resembling a rude finger, really shows how much she cares about the citizens of her country. Additionally, the “V” sign means victory or peace. Her showing the “V” sign shows us the detachment from the suffering of ordinary citizens.

Through the Baudrillardian point of view, the meme is a critique of a politics of simulation whereby images of compassionate leaders attending staged photo-ops are more significant than the real-life violence. The caricature does not mean to resemble the former Prime Minister precisely. Instead, it simplifies our public persona into a hyper-real “crying leader” who is emotionally felt through media coverage of her Metro visit. For the viewers who did not visit the bodies in hospitals or morgues but only saw the televised clips, they may end up with a narrative that the story is about a damaged building rather than dead students. By exaggerating this “drama,” the meme challenges that the visible tears over concrete have no relation to the unseen human toll of the crackdown.

From a participatory culture perspective, the meme is a perfect example of how local artists and local culture have their effect on memes. Bradley E Wiggins and G Bret Bower mention in their paper that Structuration tells us that memes are the product of social actions performed by participatory digital culture. This meme proves this idea. The meme was made using a Bangladeshi appropriate caricature and street art style to make this meme more relatable to Bangladeshi people. With the meme and meme makers challenged the government's hypocrisy about property damage highlighted by the mainstream media with the meme. They showed the real damage was the lives that were lost during the protest, not the infrastructure that can be rebuilt. The meme was created following a prop cutout so that it can be used as a physical protest prop and also as a digital meme. This blurs the difference between the streets and screens.

In Gramscian term, this meme directly challenges the state hegemonic discourse about how government prioritized the state infrastructure over the lives of its citizens. Official statements tried to frame protesters as violent by focusing on the infrastructure damage. But this meme shatters the idea of “infrastructure over people.” This meme revealed that if the leader cries for concrete than the people who were killed during her rule, her crying is nothing but drama. This incident reveals how misaligned the leader is with her values. The text, “do less drama” asks the viewers to abjure this hegemonic framing as part of performance and embrace a counter-hegemonic common sense where human life, rather than infrastructures, is the appropriate object of mourning and defense.

Memes are a form of digital folklore that taps into the longstanding Bangladeshi tradition of political cartoons and street theater. This history has now been adopted online by memes. The exaggerated features, single punchline and easily recognizable silhouette allow the meme to act as a villain. This villain symbolizes not just one leader, but a broader pattern of elite callousness.

Sharing and remixing these images, adding captions or placing cut-outs in different protest settings, allows people to refine a common story about “drama” and misplaced grief. This allows people to transform their anger into a humorous yet sharp critique that travels quickly through Facebook.

4.4 “Internet is back, everything is normal”: choking the cat, normalizing the blackout



Figure 4-Internet Shutdown and False Normalcy

This meme was taken from the Facebook page named “Fresh & Baked Memes.” This meme is created using a low-resolution image of a cat whose mouth is covered by a human hand.

We can see in the picture that the cat's eyes are faintly visible, but the facial features are smeared. This produces an eerie and suffocated look. The meme has only one caption that says “ইন্টারনেট চলে আসছে, পরিস্থিতি একদম স্বাভাবিক” which translates to “Internet is back, everything is normal.” This meme is about the internet shutdown of July 2024, when the government cut off internet during a lethal crackdown and a mass arrest of the protesters. When the situation went out of hand, the government restored the internet connection and pretended that nothing had happened, and everything was “back to normal”.

Semiotically, the strength of the meme lies in the juxtaposition of the optimistic, official statement of a situation being entirely normal to the disturbing image of a small animal being silenced. The cat is the symbol of ordinary users: harmless, non-threatening and dependent on the bigger forces. Its hand covering the mouth signifies the governmental control of speech and information, whereas the blurred effect signifies bad internet or a glitching video call. Regarding the situation in Bangladesh in 2024, when the shutdown of the internet happened on some of the most terrible days of the protest many human rights organizations have condemned the measures as attempting to cover violence, preventing accountability and spreading fear and isolation. By linking the restoration of the internet with a suffocated cat, the meme implies that the restoration was just for show. The very same hand that disconnected communication continues to hover over people, and any claim of "normalcy" is part of that control.

From a Baudrillardian perspective, the phrase "situation completely normal" shows us the regime of simulation. When the Internet was switched back on, official statements and news reports could project an image of stability. This creates a hyper-real sign of normality that ignores ongoing issues like trauma of killing, disappearance and arbitrary arrests. This meme challenges this hyper-reality by visually showing that people are still being smothered by the

authority at the very moment they are claiming that everything is fine. The blurred cat is thus a counter simulation. Instead of using a clear image, this meme uses a blurry and fuzzy image. The reason behind using this image is to show confused and anxious people who still remained gagged even after the internet service was resumed.

Choosing a cat's picture for a meme has its own value if we look at it from participatory culture and digital folklore point of view. Cats are one of the most loved animals in the world and their pictures are also very popular as a meme template. Their picture resembles chaos, helplessness and exaggerated emotion across many cultures. In Bangladesh, users use Bangla captions with these images to express their visual grammar, and also to express their local experiences of shutdown, fear and absurdity. The particular style of this image, like blurry, low quality and almost liminal, reflects "cursed image" memes that express discomfort and confusion. This matches the psychological impact documented in studies of internet blackout during the quota movement. By using this globally recognizable and playful format, this meme talks about digital repression and makes a heavy topic approachable and highly shareable. It invites viewers to laugh, but at the same time, it reflects their feelings of being cut off and then told to act as if everything is normal.

In Gramscian terms, this meme challenges a hegemonic narrative that the internet shutdown and economic disruption are temporary incidents. This narrative was used to assure business leaders and the international community. While the government was showing everything was fine, it was silently ignored responsibility for the internet blackout and violence. The official statement says that the shutdown was an accident caused by fire, and their restoring the internet after was a sign of good governance. The meme denied the statement and argued that both the blackout and restoration are techniques of domination. The hand over the cat's mouth

represents the control that the government imposed by cutting down the internet connection. The meme invites the viewers to change their perspective on this incident. If the authorities can shut down the internet during a crisis and later restore it with assurances of "normalcy," then it is safe to think that the situation may not be normal at all.

4.5 "Religion is personal, the movement is for all": Jar Jar Binks and the call for unity



Figure 5-Religious Unity and Secular Solidarity

This meme was taken from the Facebook group “Society Memes Posting.” This meme uses steal from a well-known character from the film Star Wars; Jar Jar Binks. He is a tall,

animated science fiction alien creature with elongated drooping ears, large protruding eyes and a skinny body. In the original film Jar Jar often seems clumsy and funny. In this meme he stands upright against a sandy desert background. His one hand is raised with two fingers pointing up. This resembles both a casual “listen to me” pose and a preacher making a point. On the left side of the image, a Bangla text appears "ধর্ম যারযার" ("Religion belongs to each their own"). On the right side it says "আন্দোলন সবার" ("The movement belongs to everyone"). There are no extra captions present in this picture. This meme is visually clean and well organized with the two lines of the text flanking the central figure symmetrically, making Jar Jar Binks seem as if he is delivering the message.

This meme uses irony and inversion to convey its message. Jar Jar Binks is one of the most mocked characters in global pop culture because he is often seen as an annoying and out-of-place character. Yet somehow, he always appears at any pivotal moment in Galaxy’s political history. Putting this funny character at the center of a serious political message about national unity proves that this meme is well created for its purpose. The meme uses bathos, introduced by the English poet Alexander Pope in his 1727 satirical essay *Peri Bathous, Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry*. It is a process where deliberately absurd or a lowly vehicle is used to carry a weighty idea. The Bangla text is clear and it is divided into two parts. One is personal and private (religion, yours and mine) and the second one is collective and shared (the movement, everyone’s). This meme directly counters a key strategy that was used by the government to frame the uprising as a religiously motivated one or to use communal division as a tool to undermine the movement. It says faith is a private matter. It does not collide with any personal belief and the fight against oppression belongs to every citizen regardless of their religion, ethnicity or region.

Looking at it from a Baudrillardian perspective, the meme is a simulation of national unity. It spreads the idea of a hyperreal image that shares the message of solidarity. It also circulates faster than any typical political manifesto or news article. In the middle of the internet shutdown, scattered protests and violent crackdown, a single shareable image with two lines of text became the main way for thousands of people to express and support their collective resistance. The figure of Jar Jar Binks acts separately from his original Star Wars Story. It acts as a free-floating simulacrum where he is not a gungan diplomat from Naboo. He is just a “that funny alien guy” who, in July 2024, carried a message about secular solidarity. The original meaning of this meme is irrelevant here. The meaning of this meme comes entirely from the crisis context of the uprising.

Choosing Jar Jar Binks as the main figure of this meme is significant from the perspective of participatory culture and digital folklore. He is globally known and a well-known meme template that people of different ages and cultures can easily recognize. This makes it easier for people to engage with the template. This also lowers the bar for everyone to participate in this engagement. A user in Bangladesh who has never watched Star Wars might likely recognize the character. For those who do know the film, this may add an extra layer of irony. This character, often mocked and underestimated, delivers one of the most important political messages during the movement. This double-layered humor that reflects Jenkin’s participatory culture. This meme was borrowed from global popular culture and was adopted and repurposed to use intensely in the local political context. It combines international internet culture with a specific context of the protest in Bangladesh. Other similar memes, featuring unexpected or funny characters delivering messages of unity, likely appeared at the same time, creating a group of memes focused on unusual voices calling for solidarity.

If we look at this meme from Gramsci's point of view, the meme delivers a counter hegemonic message. It challenges the government's religious and communal propaganda. The government used religious propaganda to divert the movement. Officials suggested that only a certain group of people were behind the protest. This undermines the idea that this protest was not driven by religious or political factors, but rather by the participation of the wider public. The meme asserts the idea that "religion is personal, the movement is everyone's." This idea refuses the communal framing. Instead, it calls for a secular and inclusive understanding of the protest which opposes the division among the protesters. It attempts to build a counter hegemonic common sense that is based upon shared experiences of oppression regardless of faith, culture or religion, that can unite people for collective action. As a piece of digital folklore, the meme echoes with older traditions of Bangladesh's history of resistive poetry and political slogans. Its rhythmic lines serves as a call to action. The caption "ধর্ম যারযার, আন্দোলন সবার" works as a chant or a slogan that acts as both a rallying cry and call for unity. This cry travels simultaneously through physical protest spaces and Facebook feeds as a piece of living vernacular political culture.

4.6 "Aapa, you too?": Hasina, Pharaoh and divine punishment in hell



Figure 6-Divine Punishment and Moral Verdict

This meme was taken from the public Facebook group “বাংলাদেশ MEME লীগ 0.3.”

This meme consists of a digitally composite image with a bright background of flames, smoke and demonic figures. This imagery represents hell based on Islamic iconography. Against this fiery background a young Bangladeshi man in a plain white shirt looks like he is in shock and in genuine disbelief. His mouth is slightly open and his eyebrows are raised. Behind him is the hellfire where skeletal demon figures were visibly burning in the flame. At the top of the image, in bold yellow Bangla text says "জাহান্নামে গিয়ে যখন দেখেন, হাসিনা ও ফেরাউনকে একসাথে শাস্তি দেয়া হচ্ছে" ("When you go to hell and see that Hasina and Pharaoh are being punished together"). On the left side another list appears in smaller text saying “আম্লিগ, পুলিশলীগ, ছাত্রলীগ, ব্লা ব্লা ব্লা” ("Awami League, Police League, Chhatra League, blah blah blah"). This suggests that the shocked figure sees pro government actors who are also receiving punishment.

At the bottom, a large bold yellow text delivers the punchline “আপা আপনে.?” ("Aapa, is that you?").

If we look at this meme from a semiotics point of view, it is clear that the meme uses a strong religious and cultural context. In Islamic tradition, the figure Pharaoh, also known as Fir'awn in the Quran, represents a typical tyrant who oppressed and slaughtered innocent people. It is also known that he ignored divine authority until it was too late. Placing Sheikh Hasina alongside the Pharaoh is not just an insult. It also suggests they are facing punishment like other rulers who have also killed the innocents. The yellow color of the text carries a visual urgency and drama, while the flames and the demonic figures in the background show widely shared visual codes of what hell looks like from Islamic teachings and popular media. The shocked young man who is labeled as "Awami League, Police League, Chhatra League," represents the broader supporters of the state. This includes pro-state characters like the party members, the pro-government police and the ruling party's student wing who carried out or supported the killings. They are now facing the same judgment as their leader in hell. They use the affectionate word "Apa," meaning elder sister, which Sheikh Hasina was known as among her followers. This blurs the line between an admired political figure and the condemned tyrant.

From a Baudrillardian viewpoint, this meme stages a hyperreal trial and punishment which only exist in our imagination. Though it exists only in our imagination, but it feels more emotionally satisfying and “real” than any legal process. The composite hellscape is a simulacrum. It does not show a true event but creates a symbolic scenario, it condenses anger, grief and desire. This gives us a glimpse of justice in one powerful image. In a situation where many protesters were killed or injured and those who are responsible seems unlikely to be held accountable; this meme offers a simulation of restored moral balance. In this meme, Hasina is

not just criticized, she's placed in an eternal hell alongside Pharaoh, who is a tyrant and is guaranteed divine punishment by Islamic teachings. Thus, this meme becomes a hyperreal scenario where political justice is achieved by likes and comments on Facebook instead of courts or commissions.

According to Jenkins's notion of participatory culture, this meme shows how everyday users create new content by mixing various elements. In this case, this meme combines a picture of hell, cut out of a photo of a Bengali actor and religious references to create a completely new meaning. The meme serves as a creative community where users engage with each other to create and share satirical content as a collective act of civic view. By referencing Islamic views about the end time, shows sophisticated cultural literacy as Bangladesh is country of Muslim majority people. The meme makes its message stronger by using shared religious knowledge. In alternate versions of this meme, numerous political figures are depicted together with well-known villains in history or the Quran, with the concept of divine judgement being used as a common motif to satirize.

From a Gramscian angle, this meme proves that it's counter-hegemonic by challenging the ruling party's "common sense." It criticizes the government's claim that Hasina's rule is justified by economic development, liberation war credentials and under the image as the "mother of humanity." Equating her with the Pharaoh portrays her authority as sinful and illegitimate. It also depicts her loyal followers like Awami League, police, and student wing not as heroes or patriots, but as sinners who end up doomed with her. That surprised reaction "আপা আপনে?" after all her followers' meeting hell shows the ruling party's hegemonic dream being shattered. The supporter realizes that he is too late. He is also wrong about the person he always followed. He was always on the wrong side of justice. In terms of digital folklore, the meme

updates older storytelling traditions like religious tales and cautionary tales about tyrants and turns them into shareable visuals that quickly spread through Facebook. As Bronner mentioned in his *Folklore and the Internet* that both analog and digital culture are capable of producing and expressing tradition, but they may be perceived differently. Its power lies in mixing familiar religious symbols, humor and local political issues to tell a cautionary story about supporting oppression during the July 2024 movement.

4.7 From "Epic Fury" to "NATO Plz Help": the hyperreal collapse of American military dominance



Figure 7-Comparative Global Context: US-Iran Tensions

This meme was taken from the Facebook page “Rivalxfactor” This meme consists of two panels next to each other. This is one of the most widely recognized meme templates in global Internet meme culture. The left-hand side bears the text “USA 3 WEEKS AGO” in bold black writing. It is a well edited photo of a “Doge” meme of a famous dog named Shiba Inu. The dog is dressed in heavy military gear, surrounded with fighter planes, attack helicopters, tanks and a flag of the USA. The bottom line says “IRAN IS ABOUT FEEL AMERICA’S EIPIC FURY.” The epic fury here refers to the name of the military operation “Epic Fury” launched in Iran by the USA. On the top of the right-hand side, it is written “USA NOW” also in black text. In this

case the dog is tiny and holding a NATO flag captioned “NATO plz help.” The difference between these two panels is very clear. The right dog is strong armed and in control with military equipment. In contrast, the right dog appears small, helpless and as asking for support from the alliance.

Semiotically, the meme works through a mix of deliberate scale contrast and tonal reversal. The doge is a well-known comedic simulacrum across the world. The main character of the meme is a well-known, funny dog, which represents naive overconfidence, merry stupidity or helpless cuteness depending on the situation. The left inflates the “Doge” character and the United States by outfitting the character in military gear and surrounding him with iconographic symbols of American military power like jets, tanks and stars and stripes. The aggressive caption with multiple exclamation marks “Epic Fury” enhances the joke because this is not the way serious military messages are written. This proves that the bold claims are actually hollow. On the right-hand side of the image, the dog is helpless and tiny. On this side the dog only holds the flag of NATO as it is a comfort item for the character. The change from “epic fury” to “plz help” is two outcomes of a complete geopolitical narrative.

In terms of Baudrillard, this meme reveals how political and military reality is experienced through simulations in the social media age. The majority of the viewers lacks direct knowledge of US-Iran military power. Their military knowledge about America’s military comes from almost entirely via pictures from media, news headlines and viral stories. The left sided doge does not represent the actual military power of America’s army. It is just a hyper real representation of the military power shaped by movies, news graphics and speeches by different presidents. This is a simulation of power that is way out of this world. In contrast, the left-hand side picture creates a counter-hyperreal scenario. This picture reveals the American fragility and

its dependence on the allies. None of the images shows the real strategic situation. Instead, the meme is a copy of the original layered with different layers of simulation, which shape the emotional reaction of the people to the conflict across the world.

From a participatory cultural point of view, this meme is a prime example of how a single meme template is used across the world to express political views of people across the world. The template is not a single-use item or tied to a specific cultural context. The main character “Doge” is originally from Japan. The Japanese character is used to show the conflict of USA and Iran, which is also from two different sides of the world. It is a universal template that user’s remix and recreate to express their feelings and views on global political incidents. People from all over the world and all nationalities can easily understand and decode the meme as the “Doge” template is widely known across the meme community. Even in the case of Bangladesh, this template was also used to show users' frustration about political policies and incidents. This proves that the meme is not made for a specific cultural or regional context. It is used worldwide and shows how meme grammar is continuously appropriate for global and local users. The US-Iran meme is a reflection of the larger membrane of “memescape” within which Bangladeshi political meme culture. It shows that the young users in Bangladesh are the same participants in the same participatory media ecosystem that is used by the young users in Europe, Latin America or the United States.

The meme in Gramscian terms is a challenge to the hegemony which prevails that the United States possesses a great and invincible military and global supremacy. This is a widely accepted idea, particularly since the Cold War and is common in Hollywood films, news broadcasts, and speeches by government officials. By portraying the U.S. as a small, scared dog asking NATO for help, the meme questions this hegemony through humor. It earmarks the

American power to be far more vulnerable and unpredictable than one can assume. The meme is presented in the format of a two-panel folk tale, in which a boastful hero asserts being invincible and subsequently suffers a humiliating loss. This is an ancient storytelling structure that can be easily adapted to internet memes, as digital folk can revamp old storytelling and apply it to current discussions in social media about global problems. In this study, participatory remix and counter-hegemonic humor, which defines Bangladeshi July 2024 memes do work in global political meme cultures, and the idea that Bangladeshi users engage in and contribute to a global vernacular culture of laughing at power is confirmed.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Memes as postmodern digital folk art

The analysis on Facebook political memes of the July 2024 quota reform movement and uprising reveals that Facebook political memes represent a distinct form of postmodern digital folk art. They are made and distributed by ordinary users, not by any professional cartoonists or news agencies. These users use a blend of popular cultural images, religious symbols and local jokes. This is in line with Shifman's theory about internet memes being families of digital items that are imitated, remixed and modified by those who are involved in the participatory culture where copying and variation are the most important forms of cultural production. In Bangladesh, this folk creativity is connected to local references. Meme makers use Bengali captions, Bengali popular movie stills, protest tags and national religious imagery. This helps them in narrating crisis stories that resonate with young Facebook users.

Simultaneously, these memes feature a postmodern combination of cultural fragments such as Hollywood characters, Doge template and stock shots of hell. These are interpreted in a way that is humorous and self-conscious. This is in line with Baudrillard's argument that

contemporary media culture operates through simulacra, where signs circulate independently, regardless of any definite original. The meme of Hasina and Pharaoh jointly being punished in hell does not actually demonstrate an actual scenario. Rather, it mixes Islamic eschatological motifs about the afterlife with a cut-out photograph and a familiar new format which produces a hybrid image. These memes work like traditional folk stories and jokes. They also rely on familiar narrative patterns like punishing the tyrant, mocking the powerful, the clever underdog and many more. They do this by using a visual vernacular that is specific to the online world. Thus, the political Memes on Facebook can be read as postmodern folk art. They are produced by masses of people, they are endlessly repeatable and deeply tied to local tales of morals and politics.

5.2 Simulation and the hyperreal memory of July 2024

The second important discovery is that how Facebook memes act like a hyper real memory of the July 2024 events. Here, many users remember their experience about July 2024 through memes of Facebook, rather than directly witnessing them or through the mainstream media. Jean Baudillard's theory of hyperreality describes a condition where images and models reshape how we understand reality. In this case, the "map" of the real event comes before the "territory." Several memes of the research support this idea. The meme of the media figure looking away and saying "I'm gonna pretend I didn't see that" supports this idea by creating a simplified image of the incompetence of the mainstream media during the uprising. This format is easier to circulate than any other mainstream media reports. Similarly, the image of the cat with its mouth being covered shows us how the government repressed the general public by digital censorship and by shutting down the internet. This meme shows the incident of suffocation in a playful and humorous way.

In the analysis of memes in chapter 4, it repeatedly shows the same event. Student killings, internet shutdowns, concern for property over lives, and the fall of the regime are repeatedly being shown in different memetic scenarios. This creates what Shiffman describes as a “hypermemonic logic.” In this situation, every major public event creates a wave of memes that shapes how that said event is processed and remembered by the general public. These memes are the primary means of remembrance of the uprising to many young Bangladeshis, who primarily receive political news on Facebook. They recall it as a sequence of jokes, templates and viral images and not a chronology of news stories. This does not render the memes insignificant, rather, it is a means to redesign the reality in accordance with emotional and moral requirements of the people involved. They give a hyperreal archive of July 2024 which will continue circulating even after certain posts or live updates have vanished.

5.3 Participatory culture and vernacular creativity

This research also shows how Facebook political memes are a part of participatory culture and vernacular creativity. Jenkins describes participatory culture as one with low barriers to entry, strong support for creating and sharing. He also argued that it creates a sense that individuals’ contributions matter, especially in digital environments where users act as both consumers and producers of meaning. In the event of July 2024, anyone with a smartphone and some basic editing knowledge was able to create a meme using standard images and Bengali text. One example of this is the Jar Jar Binks meme with the slogan “ধর্ম যার যার, আন্দোলন সবার.” This meme remixes a well-known character with a local slogan to make it a rallying cry and a template for further variations.

Vernacular creativity shows how meme makers weave together global pop culture, local political knowledge and insider humor. For example, the Dodge meme about the recent USA-

Iran conflict. This demonstrates how global templates can be adopted and remixed to comment on different political situations. The contrast between the hyper-armored Doge (USA 3 weeks ago) and the small anxious dog saying “NATO plz help” relies on a shared understanding of Doge memes styles and international relations. This shows how users’ communities employ humorously created imagery as a form of political analysis. As mentioned by Thomas Poell and José van Dijck that as many protestors carry smartphones and have continuous access to online platforms to share their content and observations, protest simultaneously unfolds on the ground and online. In Bangladesh, the protest meme pages repurpose similar templates to talk about government, police and student wings of the ruling party. Although the commenters were not thoroughly analyzed in this study, but it appears to extend this participatory dynamic. Users tag their friends, reinterpret the caption and suggest new punch lines. This makes memetic engagement an important way for digitally connected youth to participate in everyday political discussions.

5.4 Hegemony, resistance and ambivalence

This finding looks at how Facebook memes challenged or supported cultural hegemony in Bangladesh. Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony shows how consent and common sense help maintain power while also highlighting the potential for counter-hegemonic viewpoints for marginalized groups. The majority of the memes in this research are counter-hegemonic. These memes challenge official statements where they portray the government as the protector of law and order and the protesters as troublemakers. These memes highlight the violence of the state during the uprising, they mock the hypocrisy of the elites and look alternatively to moral frameworks. For example, the hell meme places Hasina with pharaoh challenges the hegemonic image of Hasina’s “Mother of humanity” image. This meme portrays her as a tyrant who is

destined for divine punishment. This challenges the moral of her supporters, Awami League supporters, the pro-government police and student wing cadres, who supported her oppression during the revolution.

Not all of the memes challenged the hegemony straightforwardly. Some memes reproduced gender and class stereotypes, even while criticizing the regime. Others express ambivalence by mixing cynicism with hope. For example, the meme with the slogan “ধর্ম যার যার, আন্দোলন সবার” offers a counter-hegemonic view which rejects religious division for national identity. But the idea is also based on already established tropes of a unified people that can be mobilized by various political projects. Mentioned by Thomas Poell and José van Dijck that social media platforms steer users towards personalized connections, while at the same time introducing viral dynamics in public communication that produce moments of collectivity. Shifman and Nissenbaum describe memes as contested cultural capital. They are objects that serve as both markers of subculture and “discursive weapons” in battles over meaning. This idea helps explain the tension in meme culture. On platforms like Facebook, creating or correctly interpreting memes shows that particular someone is a part of the group. Though they are part of the group, their beliefs within the group can vary widely. Memes can reinforce resentment toward certain groups, normalize violence or promote a fair society. Overall, this research shows a dynamic field of memetic struggle where dominant and opposing ideas coexist and interact.

5.5 Contributions and implications

These findings suggest several contributions for studying political communication, digital folklore and media culture in Bangladesh. First, the case study offers strong explanation about why we should take memes seriously, rather than seeing them as just a medium of humor. Shifman explains that memes reflect key aspects of digital culture, especially how users imitate

and remix content. The Facebook memes from July 2024 reveal how memes became the medium for many to process their trauma, narrating stories of injustice and imagining justice during the political crises. Secondly, through the simulation theories of Baudrillard along with Jenkin's participatory culture and Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, the study proves that memes serve multiple purposes. They are simultaneously aesthetic artefacts, modes of political participation and sites of ideological contestation. Memes are hyperreal simulations of the real events that can overshadow other representations, but they are created from grassroots efforts that sometime supports and other time challenges dominant power relations.

Finally, this research decentralizes memes research as most of the researches are heavily focused on Euro American contexts. The July 2024 uprising illustrates how global meme templates and ideas travel into the global south, influenced by local histories of authoritarianism, student politics, and religious symbols. This suggests that future research on digital activism in South Asia and beyond should pay close attention to vernacular meme culture. These cultures reflect local issues, identities, and hopes, and they interact with social media, government control, and global media. Methodologically, this multimodal and semiotic approach used in this research can also apply to other significant events to interpret how social media creates a hyperreal archive of these events. Any analysis that overlooks the memetic dimension misses an important aspect of how young people experienced, imagined and remembered the event.

6 Conclusion.

6.1 Summary of the study

This thesis looks at Facebook political memes created during Bangladesh's July 2024 quota reform movement and uprising. It argues that memes function as a postmodern digital folk art and young people use it to understand, narrate and understand political events. The study uses

Baudrillard's theory in simulacra and hyperreality, Jenkins's work on participatory culture, Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and counter hegemony along with other researches on memes and digital folklore. The study analyzed a selected group of image-based Facebook memes and their immediate context. Using multimodal semiotic analysis, it shows how these memes combined visual and textual elements to convey meaning about protest, state violence, martyrdom, religious identity and international politics. The case study reveals that memes are not peripheral jokes but they are important tools through which many young Bangladeshis experienced, understood and remembered the events of July 2024. Memes were a crucial part in succeeding in the protest. Md. Idris Ali and Ziaul Hoque found that 92.4% agreed that the movement would not succeed quickly without social media.

6.2 Key findings in relation to the research questions

In relation to the first research question, the thesis shows that Facebook political memes act as postmodern digital folk art in two ways. First, these memes are created by regular users by using vernacular cultural resources. Second, they are considered postmodern because they use remixes, intertextuality and irony. They assemble elements from local movies, global franchises and religious symbols to create new and hybrid work. The second research question, this research finds is that these memes work as a simulation and a hyperreal representation of the July 2024 event. Many users recall this event not as a linear sequence of news reports, but as a stream of viral images that turns a complex event into a strong and shareable symbol. Regarding the third question, the study found that creating and sharing memes creates a participatory culture and a space for people to participate and share their political views. This lowers the barrier for people's civic engagement and allows them to become both creators and consumers of political views. Finally, in response to the fourth question, the findings showed that memes are a

contested field of hegemony and counter-hegemony. Most memes analyzed show a counter-hegemonic view on state violence and elite hypocrisy, but also support existing biases and ambivalence. This confirms that meme culture is a space of ideological struggle, rather than uniform progressive ideas.

6.3 Limitations of the study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study looked at a relatively small number of Facebook memes from public groups and pages. This means that this thesis does not represent all types of memes created during the July 2024 uprising. Algorithmic filtering by Facebook may also have impacted the study by showing more public or uncensored memes. Second, this analysis only included publicly available memes and their observable engagement metrics. This study does not include any interviews or surveys with any meme creators or audiences. Thus, it is impossible to verify how people interpreted particular memes or whether they directly influenced offline behavior. Third, the study solely focuses on image-based memes on Facebook. It does not look at any memes from other social media platforms like TikTok or X, and it also does not look at any video-based content. Because of this, the study should be considered as one rich and interpretive account of one important slice of the July 2024 digital landscape, rather than a complete overview of all protest-related media.

6.4 Recommendations for future research

Despite these limitations, this thesis suggests several areas for further work. First, researchers should triangulate semiotic-based analysis with audience-based methods like interviews, focus groups, or digital ethnography. This would help investigate how different groups of people interpret political memes and how memetic participation connects with other forms of activism and risk-taking. Comparative studies might also be valuable, as the study

might examine Bangladeshi protest memes alongside other movements in the Global South. This would explore how global meme templates adapt to different political cultures and how digital folklore moves across languages and national borders. Additionally, long-term research could track how specific meme formats and slogans were resurfaced during later elections, protests or in state propaganda. This would highlight how crisis memes continue to influence the regular political community. Finally, more attention is needed to platform governance, surveillance and censorship. It is vital to understand how state and corporate actors algorithmically shape what people can see, share and remember. This knowledge will help us place memetic folk art in the larger context of visibility, accountability, and democratic voice in Bangladesh and beyond.

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