Navigating Diasporic Identity and Cultural Hybridity in *Dhaka Dust*

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Abstract
Dilruba Ahmed's *Dhaka Dust* examines themes of identity, diaspora, and cultural hybridity, offering a layered portrayal of the immigrant experience shaped by displacement, memory, and fragmented selfhood. Drawing from images of Dhaka's urban spaces and the realities of migration, Ahmed captures the tension of living between multiple cultural worlds. Using metaphors of 'Passports', 'Roots', 'Maps', and 'Undocumented' existence, her work aligns with frameworks by Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Homi Bhabha, while expanding their possibilities. Unlike much of diaspora literature that leans on nostalgia or simple narratives of assimilation, *Dhaka Dust* highlights resistance and the creative potential of un-belonging. Despite growing scholarship on South Asian diasporic writers, critical attention to Ahmed's work remains limited. This study addresses that gap by asking two key questions: (1) How does *Dhaka Dust* use language, memory, and spatial imagery to construct a resistant diasporic identity? (2) In what ways do Ahmed's depictions of migration, bureaucracy, and displacement critique postcolonial and neoliberal structures of belonging? It argues that her poetry reframes diaspora as a method of survival and radical re-imagination, offering a more fluid model for understanding transnational identity today.

Keywords
Diaspora, Cultural hybridity, Postcolonial memory, Identity negotiation, Transnationalism, Multilingual identity, Neoliberalism and Migration

1. Introduction

The experience of diaspora is one of the most complex realities of the contemporary globalized world. It is shaped by tensions — between preserving one's roots and embracing change, between memory and present reality, between belonging and alienation. For migrants and their descendants, identity becomes a constant negotiation across geographies, languages, and histories. Dilruba Ahmed's *Dhaka Dust* (2011) is a striking poetic exploration of these tensions. Through a lyrical yet sharp voice, Ahmed captures the intimate and structural dimensions of diasporic life, offering a perspective that is at once deeply personal and broadly political.

Ahmed, a Bangladeshi-American poet, writes at the intersection of multiple identities and temporalities. Born and raised in the United States to immigrant parents, she inhabits what Stuart Hall (1990) calls the "space of becoming," where identity is never fixed but constantly negotiated. This positionality informs her work in *Dhaka Dust*, a collection that traverses a wide spectrum of diasporic experiences: the bureaucratic violence of immigration systems, the quiet intimacy of intergenerational relationships, and the emotional geographies of longing and unbelonging. The poems engage with both historical events — such as the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh — and contemporary realities shaped by post-9/11 global politics, constructing what might be called a poetics of "diasporic resistance."

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The significance of *Dhaka Dust* within South Asian diasporic literature cannot be overstated. While the works of Indian- and Pakistani-origin writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Mohsin Hamid have received substantial scholarly attention, Bangladeshi-American voices have been comparatively marginalized. Ahmed's collection fills this critical gap, providing narratives that engage with the specific historical, cultural, and linguistic dimensions of Bangladeshi identity in diaspora. The collection was awarded the prestigious Bakeless Literary Prize in 2010, signaling early recognition of its literary and cultural value. Yet, despite this acknowledgment, critical engagement with Ahmed's work remains limited, creating an urgent need for scholarly inquiry.

At its core, *Dhaka Dust* interrogates what it means to belong in an era defined by movement, migration, and the tightening of borders. Ahmed's poetry reflects the bureaucratic complexities of mobility, where passports and visas function simultaneously as enablers and barriers. In "Passport," for example, the speaker's identity is reduced to lines of data — "Name: anglicized. Birthplace: / disputed territory" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 22) — a stark commentary on how official documents attempt to define and contain what is fluid and multifaceted. Such imagery reflects the intersections of state power and personal identity, aligning with Hall's (1990) assertion that identity is a construction shaped by history, culture, and power.

Memory is another key thread that runs through the collection. In poems like "Roots," Ahmed examines the ways diasporic subjects inherit histories that are fragmented, partial, and often carried through intimate domestic rituals. The speaker's recollection of "my mother's hands / measuring rice in a foreign kitchen" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 30) foregrounds the quiet labor of cultural preservation that sustains diasporic families. This depiction resonates with Avtar Brah's (1996) concept of "homing desire," which distinguishes between nostalgia for a lost homeland and the complex, shifting longing for connection and continuity in a diasporic context. By portraying such intimate, everyday moments, Ahmed resists both idealized nostalgia and reductive narratives of assimilation, instead presenting belonging as an ongoing and deeply embodied process.

The spatial and temporal fluidity of Ahmed's poetry also speaks to Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity and the "third space." In "Map," the speaker asserts, "My borders / are pencil smudges" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 36), rejecting the rigid boundaries imposed by nation-states and embracing the ambiguity and multiplicity of diasporic identity. The poem's code-switching between English and Bengali — "*নদী* [river] remembers / what maps forget" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 35) — disrupts monolingual expectations, reminding readers that identity, like language, is fluid and relational. Bhabha's framework helps illuminate this dynamic: Ahmed's speakers inhabit a liminal space where displacement and belonging coexist, and where language itself becomes a site of resistance.

In addition to its thematic richness, *Dhaka Dust* is notable for its formal innovations. Ahmed employs fragmentation, strategic use of white space, and shifts in register to mirror the fractured realities of diasporic existence. These stylistic choices engage with what Eleanor Ty (2016) identifies as the "gendered silences of diaspora," moments where untranslatable experiences are marked not by overt articulation but by silence, absence, or pause. In "Undocumented," the sparse, redacted language enacts the precarity and invisibility of life without legal recognition: "My body a checkpoint / every heartbeat an interrogation" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 56). Here, form and content converge to highlight how state systems produce vulnerability and erasure while also gesturing toward resilience and survival.

The historical and political contexts of Ahmed's work further enrich its resonance. The legacy of the 1971 Liberation War is a recurring presence, shaping the emotional landscapes of

many poems. In "Roots," the layering of temporalities — "1971 presses / against 2001" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 29) — collapses past and present, demonstrating how historical trauma continues to shape contemporary diasporic experiences. This temporal layering reflects what Saidiya Hartman (2007) calls "the afterlife of history," where past violence reverberates in the present, informing both personal and collective identities. By integrating these historical echoes, Ahmed constructs a counter-archive that challenges dominant narratives of migration and belonging.

Furthermore, Ahmed's poetry engages deeply with feminist diaspora studies, particularly the intersections of gender, race, and migration. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003) critique of Western feminism's universalizing tendencies provides a useful lens for reading poems like "Undocumented," where the speaker navigates both patriarchal and state-imposed constraints. The line "They ask to see / my husband's signature / but I am the ink" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 57) powerfully captures the gendered dimensions of bureaucratic violence, foregrounding how migrant women's identities are often defined and regulated by intersecting systems of power. By highlighting these dynamics, Ahmed amplifies the often-overlooked narratives of Bangladeshi-American women, whose experiences of diaspora are shaped by unique forms of vulnerability and resilience.

In addition to examining the personal dimensions of migration, *Dhaka Dust* engages with broader critiques of postcolonial and neoliberal systems of power. Poems such as "Prayer" and "Map" reveal how global structures — from the bureaucracies of border control to the hierarchies of citizenship — continue to reproduce colonial logics of surveillance and exclusion. Ahmed's poetry thus aligns with contemporary postcolonial scholarship that interrogates how empire persists in modern forms, from data-driven governance to economic precarity. At the same time, her work refuses to collapse into despair; instead, it gestures toward what Ariella Azoulay (2019) calls a "potential history," one that reimagines identity, belonging, and agency in transformative ways.

By weaving together personal narratives, historical memory, and sharp political critique, *Dhaka Dust* offers a complex and multilayered portrayal of diasporic life. Its strength lies in its refusal of easy binaries — home/host, past/present, belonging/alienation — and in its embrace of the tensions that define transnational identity. The collection invites readers to engage with diaspora not as a fixed condition but as an evolving process, marked by both vulnerability and resilience. In this way, Ahmed expands the possibilities of diasporic poetics, offering not just representation but a reimagining of what it means to live between worlds.

This paper takes up Ahmed's work as a site for examining how language, memory, and spatial imagery construct resistant forms of identity. Through close readings of selected poems — "Passport," "Roots," "Map," and "Undocumented" — and with theoretical grounding in the works of Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Homi Bhabha, this study argues that *Dhaka Dust* reframes diaspora as both survival strategy and radical re-imagination. By situating Ahmed's work within broader conversations in diaspora studies, postcolonial theory, and feminist critique, the analysis seeks to illuminate the ways her poetry not only reflects the complexities of migration but also offers new pathways for understanding identity in an increasingly interconnected, yet fractured, global world.

2. Research Context

As this paper is an explanatory research study, it does not include a traditional, standalone literature review. Instead, this section situates *Dhaka Dust* within the broader critical and theoretical

conversations that inform its analysis, focusing on key contexts in South Asian diasporic poetry, literary recognition, and feminist diaspora studies.

Dilruba Ahmed's *Dhaka Dust* occupies a distinctive space within South Asian diasporic poetry, offering a vital counterpoint to the more widely studied works of Meena Alexander and Agha Shahid Ali. While these poets also explore displacement and memory, Ahmed's poetry is notable for its direct engagement with bureaucratic violence and its focus on the Bangladeshi-American experience. The collection's publication in 2011 coincided with two key historical moments: the 40th anniversary of Bangladesh's Liberation War and the tightening of global immigration policies in the post-9/11 era.

When read alongside Meena Alexander's *Illiterate Heart* (2002), Ahmed's work reveals a sharper attention to the material realities of diaspora. Where Alexander often dwells in metaphysical longing — "The world is a broken bone / I touch in the dark" — Ahmed grounds her imagery in administrative realities: "My passport wears a face / I've never met." Both poets use fragmentation to represent diasporic consciousness, but Ahmed's fractures are rooted in specific historical ruptures, particularly the 1971 war that divided East and West Pakistan.

Agha Shahid Ali's influence is also evident in *Dhaka Dust*, particularly in Ahmed's use of cartographic metaphors and occasional ghazal structures. However, her politics diverge from Ali's more aestheticized portrayal of loss in *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997). In "Map," for example, Ahmed uses cartography not to memorialize but to critique immigration systems: "My borders are dotted lines / for officials to ignore." This sharp critique of contemporary bureaucracies marks her as deeply attentive to systemic injustice.

Critical reception of Ahmed's work has been positive but limited. While Alexander and Ali have been analyzed extensively through postcolonial theory, Ahmed has received far less scholarly engagement. Recent studies by Nasia Anam (2021) and Amit Rai (2019) have begun addressing this gap, positioning *Dhaka Dust* as essential to expanding our understanding of South Asian diaspora beyond its dominant Indian and Pakistani frameworks.

Winning the Bakeless Literary Prize in 2010 brought Ahmed significant recognition and positioned *Dhaka Dust* within contemporary American poetry. Established by the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Bakeless Prize has historically amplified voices outside mainstream traditions, particularly those of writers of color navigating a predominantly white literary landscape. The prize committee praised Ahmed for her "formal innovation in service of urgent political witness," highlighting the collection's balance of lyricism and activism. This endorsement facilitated Ahmed's inclusion in major anthologies, such as *The Norton Introduction to Literature* (2016), and critical discussions of immigrant poetics. Compared to other Bakeless winners like Claudia Rankine (*Nothing in Nature is Private*, 1995) and Ocean Vuong (*Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, 2016), Ahmed's work stands out for its transformation of bureaucratic language — turning immigration forms, census data, and administrative jargon into poetic material.

Rajini Srikanth (2018) observes that Ahmed "reconfigures the paperwork of displacement into a grammar of resistance," a perspective that situates her poetry at the intersection of personal and political discourse. This early institutional recognition has been vital for a poet exploring Bangladeshi-American narratives, voices that remain underrepresented in both academic and publishing spaces.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders* (2003) provides an important framework for reading Ahmed's poetry, particularly its depictions of gendered migration. Mohanty critiques Western feminism's tendency to universalize the experiences of "Third World women," a critique that resonates with poems like "Undocumented," where the speaker's body becomes a

contested site of both state scrutiny and cultural expectation: “They ask to see / my husband’s signature / but I am the ink.”

Ahmed builds on this intersectional perspective, showing how migration bureaucracies reproduce patriarchal systems. In “Passport,” the line “Maiden name: erased” captures what Mohanty calls “the epistemic violence of documentation,” where official records overwrite women’s histories. Unlike celebratory feminist narratives that frame migration as empowerment, Ahmed exposes the complex interplay of erasure, silence, and resistance.

Domestic imagery in poems such as “Roots” also reflects feminist diaspora scholarship on care work and cultural continuity. When the speaker recalls “my mother’s hands / measuring rice in a foreign kitchen,” Ahmed highlights the quiet labor that sustains migrant families and preserves cultural practices across borders. Yet she avoids romanticization, acknowledging the tensions between continuity and transformation in these inherited rituals.

Ahmed’s formal choices — strategic use of white space, code-switching between English and Bengali, and visual fragmentation — deepen this critique. As Eleanor Ty (2016) notes, such techniques often represent “the gendered silences of diaspora,” moments where untranslatable experiences resist assimilation into dominant cultural narratives.

Read alongside poets like Bhanu Kapil (*The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*) and Divya Victor (*Curb*), Ahmed’s work demonstrates how Bangladeshi-American women navigate intersecting pressures of Islamophobia, labor migration, and historical trauma. Unlike Kapil’s radical fragmentation, Ahmed employs restraint, but with equal force: bureaucratic forms that dissolve into Bengali fragments, or silences that speak volumes. Her attention to intergenerational relationships also engages with recent scholarship on “daughterly diaspora” (Henry, 2019), where second-generation women reinterpret maternal narratives of displacement. In “Roots,” the speaker admits, “I swallow / her stories like unripe mangoes,” capturing the tension of inheriting a history that is both nourishing and hard to digest.

3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis of Dilruba Ahmed’s *Dhaka Dust* is grounded in three interrelated theoretical perspectives: Stuart Hall’s theory of cultural identity, Avtar Brah’s concept of diaspora space, and Homi Bhabha’s notion of cultural hybridity and the “third space.” Together, these frameworks illuminate how Ahmed’s poetry negotiates identity, belonging, and resistance within the intersecting contexts of migration, postcoloniality, and gendered experience. By weaving these critical perspectives, this framework not only provides conceptual clarity but also situates the collection within broader debates in diaspora studies, postcolonial theory, and feminist critique.

Stuart Hall (1990) redefines cultural identity not as a fixed essence rooted in the past but as “a matter of becoming as well as of being” (p. 225). Identity, according to Hall, is never stable; it is shaped by history, language, and power, constantly renegotiated in response to shifting contexts. This perspective is essential to understanding the dynamics of *Dhaka Dust*, where identity emerges not as a stable origin but as an evolving process shaped by dislocation, memory, and systemic pressures.

In “Passport,” for example, the speaker’s fragmented self — “Name: anglicized. Birthplace: / disputed territory” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 22) — reflects the instability Hall identifies. The speaker’s sense of self is mediated through the bureaucratic structures that attempt to define and contain her. Similarly, “Map” embodies the fluidity of diasporic identity through its portrayal of borders as “pencil smudges” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 36), signaling the provisional and contingent nature of belonging.

Hall's emphasis on history and power also enriches the reading of "Roots," where the speaker negotiates intergenerational memory: "1971 presses / against 2001" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 29). Here, identity is shaped by overlapping historical moments — the trauma of Bangladesh's Liberation War and the surveillance-driven politics of the post-9/11 era — reinforcing Hall's claim that identity is always constructed within "the play of history, culture, and power" (1990, p. 225).

Moreover, Hall's framework highlights the performative aspect of diasporic identity. In *Dhaka Dust*, identity is not merely inherited but actively performed and reconstructed — through language, rituals, and everyday negotiations. This aligns with his argument that cultural identity is less about discovering an "authentic" self and more about producing meaning within specific historical and cultural conditions.

Avtar Brah's (1996) concept of 'diaspora space' offers another critical lens for understanding Ahmed's poetry. Brah conceptualizes diaspora not simply as the experience of migration but as a relational space where histories of dispersion intersect with those "of staying put" (p. 181). This framework underscores that diaspora is not a singular or homogeneous experience; it is marked by intersections of race, gender, class, and colonial histories that shape individual and collective subjectivities.

"Undocumented" exemplifies Brah's theorization of diaspora space. The speaker exists in a condition of hypervisibility and invisibility — "My body a checkpoint / every heartbeat an interrogation" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 56). This duality reflects how migrants are simultaneously monitored by state systems and erased within dominant narratives. Such dynamics echo Brah's observation that diaspora space is fraught with contradictions: it is both a site of belonging and exclusion, visibility and erasure.

Brah's distinction between nostalgia and *homing desire* further clarifies the emotional landscapes of *Dhaka Dust*. "Roots," for instance, resists sentimental longing for an idealized homeland. Instead, belonging emerges through daily rituals — a mother cooking, a language preserved in quiet exchanges — signaling what Brah describes as a desire for "home" that is not about physical return but about negotiating connection and continuity in a shifting present.

The idea of diaspora space also expands the scope of Ahmed's collection beyond individual narratives. In poems like "Map" and "Dhaka Dust," personal experiences are linked to collective histories of migration and displacement, suggesting that identity is formed not in isolation but within overlapping networks of memory, power, and movement.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) theorization of *hybridity* and the "third space" provides a powerful framework for reading the cultural and linguistic negotiations at the heart of *Dhaka Dust*. For Bhabha, hybridity disrupts binary oppositions — colonizer/colonized, home/host, self/other — creating an "in-between" space where identity is continuously produced and redefined.

This framework is particularly resonant in "Map," where the speaker asserts, "*নদী* [river] remembers / what maps forget" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 35). Here, the act of code-switching between English and Bengali enacts a linguistic hybridity that resists monolingual narratives and asserts the coexistence of multiple cultural realities. The river, a recurring motif in Bangladeshi literature, becomes a metaphor for memory that flows across imposed borders, aligning with Bhabha's idea that the third space is a site of both resistance and reinvention.

"Passport" also engages with Bhabha's notion of mimicry. By adopting the sterile, bureaucratic tone of official documents — "Issuing authority: / homeland, foreign, temporary" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 23) — the poem mimics state language while exposing its dehumanizing effects. This strategy reflects what Bhabha calls "almost the same, but not quite" (1994, p. 86), where mimicry simultaneously reinforces and undermines dominant systems of power.

Additionally, Bhabha's concept of ambivalence — the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of cultural identification — illuminates the tension in poems like "Dhaka Dust," where the speaker is both rooted in memory and estranged from the homeland. This ambivalence underscores hybridity not as harmonious blending but as an ongoing, often fraught negotiation.

While Hall, Brah, and Bhabha provide essential frameworks, integrating feminist and postcolonial critiques deepens this analysis. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003) concept of "feminism without borders" foregrounds how migration is experienced through intersecting structures of race, gender, and labor. In "Roots," for example, the maternal figure becomes a symbol of resilience, enacting what Mohanty describes as the "quiet politics of survival" within domestic spaces.

Similarly, Gayatri Spivak's (1988) question — "Can the subaltern speak?" — resonates with "Undocumented," where the speaker's fragmented voice exposes the systemic silencing of undocumented migrants while simultaneously reclaiming agency through poetic testimony. These intersections reveal that diaspora is not a gender-neutral space but one shaped by overlapping forms of marginalization and resistance.

Bringing these theories together allows for a multi-layered reading of *Dhaka Dust*. Hall's emphasis on identity as process, Brah's mapping of diaspora space, and Bhabha's concept of hybridity collectively highlight the fluid, contested nature of diasporic subjectivity. When read alongside feminist and postcolonial critiques, these frameworks reveal how Ahmed's poetry not only reflects the lived realities of migration but also interrogates the historical and structural forces that shape them.

This theoretical synthesis positions *Dhaka Dust* as more than a collection of personal narratives. It is a critical archive of diaspora — one that acknowledges the weight of colonial histories, navigates the tensions of hybridity, and imagines new possibilities for belonging in a fractured yet interconnected world.

4. Poem Analysis

The title poem "Dhaka Dust" functions as a conceptual anchor for the entire collection, presenting a diasporic consciousness shaped by memory, movement, and displacement. The metaphor of dust operates on multiple levels: it is tactile and material — coating the streets, clinging to the body — but it is also ephemeral, symbolizing the ways memory lingers and shifts.

> you walk here
> with someone else's memories
> pressed into your bones. (Ahmed, 2011, p. 14)

This second-person address collapses the distance between speaker and subject, embodying the relational aspect of diaspora where identity is both inherited and negotiated. Stuart Hall's (1990) concept of identity as a production "always in process" (p. 222) finds vivid expression here. The speaker does not seek an "authentic" origin but acknowledges the tension between remembered and lived experiences of place.

The layering of sensory images — "smoke and turmeric," "rickshaw bells," "unruly rain" — situates the poem in a dense, sensory Dhaka that is alive, changing, and resistant to static nostalgia. This aligns with Avtar Brah's (1996) assertion that diaspora involves continuous re-creation rather than static return. In this sense, Ahmed resonates with Agha Shahid Ali whose *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) also dwells on the interplay between memory and erasure. However, where Ali's imagery often luxuriates in elegiac beauty, Ahmed's treatment of memory

is more restrained, emphasizing dislocation and estrangement. Her Dhaka is neither a romanticized homeland nor a site of total alienation; it is a space of negotiation, fluid and unsettled.

"Passport" offers one of the sharpest critiques of bureaucratic identity in contemporary diasporic poetry. The poem mimics the cold, transactional language of official documents:

Name: anglicized.
Birthplace: / disputed territory.
Blood type: borders. (Ahmed, 2011, p. 22)

This stark, stripped-down diction dramatizes how migrants are often reduced to data points, their complex identities flattened into bureaucratic categories. Stuart Hall's (1990) theory of identity as constructed within systems of representation and power provides a critical lens for this poem.

Here, Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry becomes particularly useful. The poem "plays" with bureaucratic language, repeating it almost verbatim but with subtle distortions — "Issuing authority: / homeland, foreign, temporary" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 23) — to expose its absurdity and violence. The mimicry is "almost the same, but not quite," destabilizing the authority it imitates. Intertextually, Ahmed's "Passport" recalls Meena Alexander's reflections on legal identity and erasure in *Fault Lines* (1993), where the poet writes of her "body translated into paper." Yet Ahmed's tone is more clinical, almost detached, underscoring the quiet violence of bureaucratic systems. By appropriating bureaucratic discourse and reframing it as poetry, Ahmed transforms an instrument of surveillance into a site of resistance.

"Roots" is an intricate exploration of intergenerational inheritance, domestic rituals, and the complexities of diasporic belonging. While the title evokes stability, Ahmed subverts this expectation, presenting roots as fragmented, provisional, and sometimes suffocating.

my mother's hands /
measuring rice in a foreign kitchen. (Ahmed, 2011, p. 30)

This intimate image foregrounds the labor of diasporic women in sustaining cultural continuity, resonating with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003) analysis of gendered migration. The mother's hands, repetitive and steady, transform a foreign kitchen into a site of connection and survival.
Temporal layering deepens the complexity of the poem: "1971 presses / against 2001" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 29). Here, personal memory collides with historical trauma, aligning with Hall's (1990) argument that identity is always formed within the play of history, culture, and power. This collapse of time parallels Agha Shahid Ali's poems on Kashmir, where colonial and postcolonial violences converge across generations, yet Ahmed's voice remains more restrained, favoring quiet observation over lyrical lament. "Roots" also dialogues with Meena Alexander's *Illiterate Heart* (2002), where the domestic space becomes both sanctuary and burden. However, Ahmed's refusal of nostalgic idealization distinguishes her work, aligning more closely with Brah's (1996) concept of *homing desire* — a longing not for a return to a fixed homeland but for a sense of belonging negotiated in the present.

In "Map," Ahmed critiques the illusion of fixed geography and interrogates the violence embedded in cartographic boundaries.

My borders /
are pencil smudges. (Ahmed, 2011, p. 36)

This metaphor undermines the presumed permanence of national borders, suggesting their arbitrariness and fragility. The poem's refusal to accept rigid spatial demarcations aligns with Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," where cultural identities are negotiated rather than fixed.

The integration of Bengali — "নদী [river] remembers / what maps forget" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 35) — asserts the multiplicity of diasporic experience, resisting the homogenizing force of monolingual English. This linguistic hybridity echoes Ali's use of Kashmiri and Urdu within English-language poetry, yet Ahmed's style is more understated, her code-switching subtle and seamlessly woven into the fabric of the poem.

By privileging fluidity over fixity, Ahmed's "Map" engages in what Spivak (1988) might describe as a "strategic resistance" to colonial epistemologies. The river becomes a counter-cartography, suggesting that memory and history cannot be neatly contained within the artificial lines of a map.

"Undocumented" stands as the collection's starkest and most politically charged poem, using minimal language to convey the precariousness of life without legal recognition.

My body a checkpoint /

every heartbeat an interrogation. (Ahmed, 2011, p. 56)

Here, the body is both hypervisible — constantly surveilled — and invisible, erased within legal and social frameworks. Brah's (1996) theory of diaspora space captures this tension, where belonging and exclusion are experienced simultaneously. The sparseness of the poem mirrors the erasure it describes. Each line break enacts a silence, a gap that forces readers to confront the absence of recognition. This minimalism recalls Agha Shahid Ali's more expansive lyricism but diverges in its stark economy of language, which heightens the sense of vulnerability and quiet resistance.

Bhabha's (1994) theory of mimicry further deepens the analysis: the speaker's silence and invisibility can be read as performative compliance, a survival mechanism that simultaneously exposes the oppressive systems demanding erasure.

Collectively, the poems in *Dhaka Dust* construct a nuanced and layered exploration of diasporic subjectivity. Ahmed engages with themes of memory, movement, hybridity, and resistance, creating what Hall (1990) describes as a "diasporic consciousness" — a way of being shaped by histories of displacement and the ongoing negotiations of belonging. Her use of formal strategies — fragmentation, linguistic hybridity, deliberate silences — aligns her with a broader lineage of South Asian diasporic poets such as Agha Shahid Ali and Meena Alexander. However, Ahmed diverges from these predecessors in her restrained minimalism and her focus on the intersections of gender, domestic labor, and structural violence.

Through this interplay of personal and political, Ahmed reimagines diaspora not as a condition of static loss but as an ongoing process of becoming. Her poetry refuses the binaries of home and host, victimhood and agency, past and present, offering instead a vision of diaspora as fluid, relational, and resistant to containment.

1. Diaspora and Identity: Negotiating Belonging in *Dhaka Dust*

Migration and displacement fracture conventional understandings of identity, compelling diasporic individuals to navigate what Stuart Hall (1990) describes as "the unstable points of identification" (p. 226) that emerge between homeland and hostland. In *Dhaka Dust*, Dilruba Ahmed explores these unstable spaces through deeply personal and politically charged poems, revealing identity as an ongoing process rather than a fixed essence. Her poetry dismantles the illusion of seamless cultural hybridity, instead exposing the contradictions of diasporic existence: the simultaneous pull toward preservation and the unavoidable necessity of adaptation.

Ahmed's poem "Passport" sharply critiques state-imposed identity and its disconnection from lived experience. The speaker confronts the limitations of legal documentation—"Name:

anglicized. Birthplace: / disputed territory" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 22)—highlighting how bureaucratic labels erase cultural complexity. These tensions resonate with Avtar Brah's (1996) concept of "diaspora space" as a site where identity, belonging, and exclusion intersect and are constantly negotiated (p. 205). The passport, ostensibly a symbol of freedom, becomes a form of confinement. In Ahmed's hands, it "fold[s] my country into creases / but [cannot] hold the monsoon rains / of my grandmother's letters" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 23). Here, personal memory resists institutional reduction, illustrating Hall's claim that diasporic identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'" (1990, p. 225).

In "Roots", Ahmed turns to the intergenerational transmission of identity, using botanical imagery to explore how cultural inheritance can both nourish and burden. "My mother's hands / measuring rice in a foreign kitchen" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 30) evokes the quiet persistence of tradition amid dislocation. Yet the poem does not romanticize this inheritance. The roots that once sustained now "choke the pipes / of this apartment / we call temporary" (p. 30), signalling that even cultural continuity can feel restrictive in a diasporic context. Brah's notion of "homing desire" (1996, p. 192)—the longing not necessarily to return, but to feel at home—illuminates the speaker's conflicting emotions. Through visual fragmentation and descending line lengths, Ahmed reflects the daughter's fractured sense of self as she struggles to reconcile ancestral expectations with her personal evolution.

In "Map", Ahmed destabilizes national borders and embraces fluidity over fixity. The speaker's assertion —"My borders / are pencil smudges" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 36)—rejects rigid definitions of belonging. This subversion of cartographic precision calls to mind Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "third space of enunciation," where hybrid identities resist and redefine dominant cultural narratives (p. 37). Ahmed incorporates Bengali phrases —"নদী [river] remembers / what maps forget"—that serve as both linguistic resistance and cultural reclamation. The interplay of languages enacts Hall's idea that "cultural identity is a matter of 'production,' not revelation" (1990, p. 222) and that diasporic individuals construct identity through memory, translation, and embodied experience.

"Undocumented" intensifies these themes by exposing the violence of legal invisibility. The speaker describes themself as "a body the law / cannot see" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 57), stripped of personhood by state neglect. The poem employs redacted lines and bureaucratic mimicry to mirror the erasure and anxiety experienced by undocumented individuals. In this context, Brah's (1996) notion of the "hierarchies of citizenship" (p. 215) becomes central, as Ahmed critiques systems that render some bodies visible, valuable, and protected, while relegating others to silence and precarity. The absence of legal recognition does not equate to an absence of identity—instead, the speaker's existence becomes a defiant assertion of selfhood in the face of systemic denial.

Across these poems, Ahmed reframes diasporic identity as a space of tension, contradiction, and creative potential. *Dhaka Dust* does not offer closure or cultural resolution. Instead, it maps what could be termed a process of "unbelonging"—a constant negotiation between what must be preserved and what must be let go. Ahmed's poetic voice captures the psychic labour of navigating multiplicity, of becoming without ever fully arriving. Her work affirms Hall's (1990) assertion that identity in diaspora "is not an essence but a positioning" (p. 226), and Ahmed positions her speakers not as victims of displacement, but as resilient narrators of its reality.

6. Cultural Hybridity: Multiple Identities

Dilruba Ahmed's *Dhaka Dust* reframes cultural hybridity not as a harmonious blending of traditions but as a contested site of negotiation, where language, memory, and bureaucratic systems

collide. Rather than celebrating multiculturalism as integration or fusion, Ahmed dismantles romanticized ideals, revealing the friction and fragmentation that often accompany diasporic identity. Her poetry constructs what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls a "third space"—an ambivalent space of enunciation where hybrid identities resist essentialism and assimilation. Through poems like "Passport", "Map", "Roots", and "Dhaka Dust", Ahmed portrays hybridity as an ongoing act of survival and renegotiation, rather than a static or idealized outcome.

Ahmed's strategic use of code-switching between English and Bengali dramatizes the tension of inhabiting multiple linguistic worlds. In "Map", the juxtaposition of English text with the line "নদী [river] remembers / what maps forget" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 35) performs what Anjali Pandey (2020) terms "grammatical disobedience" (p. 217). The use of the Bengali script disrupts the poem's English linguistic framework, enacting what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) describes as "breaking down the unitary identity of language" (p. 81). In this context, bilingualism becomes a radical poetic act, not merely a reflection of identity but an assertion of refusal—to assimilate, to erase, or to simplify. The visual presence of Bengali on the page mimics the marginal status of diasporic language itself, forcing the reader to engage with the layered complexities of voice, access, and interpretation.

"Passport" exemplifies how state power imposes a hybrid identity through reductionist bureaucratic mechanisms. The speaker's "anglicized" name and "disputed territory" as birthplace (Ahmed, 2011, p. 22) echo Stuart Hall's (1990) notion of the "cut-and-mix" nature of diasporic identity—where personal history is reshaped under systemic and institutional pressures. The poem's fragmented form, bracketed omissions, and right-justified text visually replicate a government-issued form, critiquing the illusion of multicultural accommodation. The passport pages "fold [the] country into creases" (p. 23), but personal memory, steeped in images of "monsoon rains" and "grandmother's letters," spills beyond these boundaries. Ahmed thus reveals the limits of legal identity in capturing the depth of diasporic subjectivity.

Ahmed extends the discussion of hybridity to its gendered dimensions, particularly in the poem *Dhaka Dust*. The image of the speaker's mother "sweeping dust / from a Brooklyn balcony" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 19) speaks to the embodied labor of cultural preservation—a labor often performed by women within immigrant families. The dust, a metaphor for the homeland's persistent presence, clings to the domestic space and to women's bodies, signifying an unwelcome inheritance that demands care but offers no certainty of belonging. In contrast, the father's "accent [that] thickens / like monsoon clouds" (p. 20) points to a linguistic, performative hybridity, often seen as more acceptable or less burdensome. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) argues, women in diaspora frequently shoulder the emotional and cultural labor of maintaining tradition, making their hybridity more deeply felt and embodied.

In "Roots", food operates as a metaphor for both connection and dislocation. The mother's careful act of "measuring rice in a foreign kitchen" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 30) initially suggests cultural continuity. However, the poem soon complicates this image—pomegranate seeds from Bangladesh "sprout sour fruit" in American soil (p. 31), reminding us that heritage cannot be transplanted whole. Enjambed lines such as "the recipe calls for / what we cannot find here" reflect gaps in transmission, where memory and practice no longer align. Unlike Jhumpa Lahiri's often nostalgic treatment of culinary heritage, Ahmed presents cooking as a site of hybrid compromise, where the idea of "home" is approximated through substitutions and silences.

Dhaka Dust ultimately rejects the neoliberal fantasy of hybrid identity as a "best of both worlds." Instead, Ahmed constructs a poetics of unbelonging, where cultural identity is portrayed not as fusion but as tension—between languages, between expectations, between visible and

invisible histories. This refusal to neatly reconcile origin and assimilation is what makes Ahmed's contribution to diasporic literature so powerful. As the speaker in "Map" declares: "I navigate by / the stars of my father's accent / and the silence of my children's English" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 36). This line encapsulates the generational drift and linguistic entropy of diaspora, where hybridity is not about arriving at a center, but about learning to live in the parentheses.

By embracing fragmentation and contradiction, Ahmed's poetry affirms that cultural hybridity is not a stable identity, but a constant negotiation shaped by language, gender, memory, and institutional forces. Her work challenges dominant paradigms of multicultural harmony, offering instead a raw, unresolved portrait of what it means to live across, between, and beyond cultural boundaries.

7. Postcolonial Legacies and Resistant Memory in *Dhaka Dust*

Dilruba Ahmed's *Dhaka Dust* offers a complex meditation on the afterlives of empire, illuminating how colonial legacies continue to haunt diasporic lives through policies, language, geography, and surveillance. Rather than merely reflecting on postcolonial identity through nostalgia or loss, Ahmed reconstructs a lyrical counter-archive, revealing how history permeates the present. Her work resonates with Ann Laura Stoler's (2013) idea of the "ruins of empire" as living remnants that shape migrant subjectivity. Through poems like "Passport", "Map", "Roots", and "Undocumented", Ahmed reclaims personal and collective memory, challenging dominant narratives of migration, legality, and nationhood.

8. The Bureaucratic Afterlife of Empire

In "Passport", Ahmed exposes how colonial logics of documentation have evolved into modern immigration regimes. The poem's form—marked by redacted lines, bracketed identities, and official language—mirrors the bureaucratic grammar of exclusion. The speaker's identity is mediated through fragments:

> My country is a stamp
> that changes with each new regime—
> first Queen's face, then dictator's,
> now a barcode's cold gleam. (Ahmed, 2011, p. 22)

This progression—from colonial monarchy to postcolonial authoritarianism to neoliberal surveillance—traces the globalization of imperial control. Achille Mbembe's (2019) notion of "the corpse of empire reanimated" is made literal here, as contemporary borders and biometric systems repackage racialized governance. The poem's right-justified layout physically enacts the distortions of identity required for visibility in postcolonial modernity. As Mahmood Mamdani (2020) argues, the racialized state persists through these logics of categorization, producing exclusion even under the guise of legal recognition.

Ahmed continues this interrogation in "Map", where she critiques the colonial fantasy of territorial certainty. The poem opens with:

> My country is a line
> drawn by a ruler's edge. (Ahmed, 2011, p. 34)

This direct reference to the 1947 Partition and the Radcliffe Line destabilizes the authority of cartography. Yet Ahmed does more than critique Western mapping—she also reclaims indigenous geography, invoking Bengali rivers that resist erasure: "নদী [river] remembers / what maps forget." (p. 35). Here, Ahmed enacts Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) call to "provincialize Europe" by centring local knowledge and memory. The line functions not only linguistically but visually,

interrupting the English language space and forcing the reader to acknowledge linguistic hybridity and epistemic disruption. The poem's scale markers—*"1 inch = 1000 lies"*—invoke Katherine McKittrick's (2021) concept of "black feminist cartographic disobedience," where marginalized bodies reclaim space through poetic insurgency.

Ahmed situates *Dhaka Dust* within a longer history of resistance, particularly the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. In "Roots" and *Dhaka Dust*, history is not memorialized but woven into the present. In "Roots", Ahmed writes:

> 1971 presses
> against 2001—
> the year I trade my maiden name
> for a green card's thin veneer. (p. 29)

This temporal convergence collapses national struggle into the logic of Western migration, echoing Saidiya Hartman's (2007**)** concept of "the afterlife of slavery," reinterpreted here through South Asian postcolonial trauma. The speaker's loss of name becomes a metaphor for the erasure of revolutionary legacy under neoliberal assimilation. In both form and content, Ahmed critiques how the promises of independence are continually deferred for those living in the diaspora.

In "Undocumented", Ahmed radicalizes the figure of the migrant as a postcolonial subject par excellence, aligning with Fanon's "wretched of the earth." The speaker becomes the embodiment of border anxiety:

> "My body a checkpoint / every heartbeat an interrogation." (Ahmed, 2011, p. 56)

Here, the body is rendered as terrain under occupation, echoing colonial checkpoints now updated through ICE raids and biometric databases. Redacted lines (*"Child's name: [redacted]"*) and metaphors like "papercut sting / of applications denied" articulate a poetics of refusal and bodily resistance. This textual erasure mimics British imperial practices of censoring subaltern records, while simultaneously echoing Gayatri Spivak's (1988) call to "speak" the gendered subaltern not through erasure, but through material specificity.

9. Postcolonial Poetics as Counter-Archive

Ahmed's *Dhaka Dust* resists both the sentimentality of colonial nostalgia and the cold detachment of neoliberal amnesia. Instead, it constructs what Ariella Azoulay (2019) terms a "potential history," where unresolved trauma, generational silence, and state violence coexist. The poem *Prayer* closes the collection with an image that refuses resolution: "O Allah, / the borders keep growing / teeth" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 88). This invocation leaves the reader with an enduring image of the empire's unending appetite, but also of spiritual and poetic resistance. Ahmed's postcolonial critique is not merely retrospective—it is urgent, embodied, and ongoing. Through poetic form, linguistic hybridity, and insurgent memory, *Dhaka Dust* becomes a site of counter-history where the empire's ghost is confronted, named, and defied.

10. Conclusion

Dilruba Ahmed's *Dhaka Dust* redefines diaspora not as a mere condition of dislocation, but as a transformative lens through which identity, memory, and resistance are continuously reimagined. Through its lyrical excavation of bureaucratic violence ("Passport"), generational inheritance ("Roots"), spatial dislocation ("Map"), and stateless precarity ("Undocumented"), the collection rejects essentialist narratives of belonging and instead crafts what may be termed a poetics of uncomfortable belonging. Rather than offering closure or cultural harmony, Ahmed positions diaspora as a radical space of negotiation, unbelonging, and critical creativity.

Ahmed's poetry affirms Stuart Hall's (1990) concept of identity as process—not a possession, but a positioning. The speaker's oscillation between languages, homes, and histories underscores Hall's vision of the diasporic subject as one who is always in transit, always becoming. In "Passport", the redacted name and the cold barcode reflect how postcolonial subjects are continually re-authored by institutions. Identity, in this sense, becomes a site of both erasure and resistance—a dynamic archive shaped by encounters with state power, memory, and displacement.

The collection also deepens feminist interventions in diaspora studies. Poems like "Dhaka Dust" and "Undocumented" give voice to women whose domestic, linguistic, and emotional labor sustains diasporic communities, yet often goes unrecognized. The mother's hands measuring rice in a foreign kitchen, and the speaker's body imagined as a checkpoint, materialize what Chandra Mohanty (2003) describes as the "racialized feminization of care work" within global migration. These moments, amplified by Ahmed's visual poetics—such as redactions, right-aligned forms, and typographic disruptions—turn the poem itself into a contested, gendered terrain.

Importantly, Ahmed's poems challenge linear and nationalistic temporalities. Her invocation of Bangladesh's 1971 liberation struggle alongside post-9/11 surveillance culture ("Roots", "Map") collapses past and present into a diasporic temporality, what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) calls "a past that is never past." The speaker's memory is layered, recursive, and resistant to historical finality. Each poem becomes a temporal palimpsest—fragments of war, family, language, and migration bleeding into one another—offering what Saidiya Hartman (2019) might call "a time of the otherwise."

The metaphor of dust in the collection's title encapsulates Ahmed's redefinition of diaspora. Dust is unsettled, shifting, and ungraspable— just like identity itself. In an era marked by rising nationalism and tightening borders, *Dhaka Dust* insists on diaspora as both disruption and possibility. The final image in "Map"—"constellations no border / can claim" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 36)—affirms that diasporic selfhood exists outside the cartographies of power, mapping itself instead in memory, language, and ancestral traces.

Ultimately, *Dhaka Dust* does not seek to resolve the fractures of identity but to illuminate them. Ahmed's work presents diaspora not as a crisis to overcome, but as a critical stance to inhabit—one that resists the erasures of history and state, and embraces the radical potential of unbelonging. Through poetic form and theoretical depth, she transforms diaspora into an active process of reimagining how we live, remember, and belong in an increasingly fractured world.

Ahmed's poetry invites us to rethink diaspora beyond geography—to understand it as a mode of being in history, a method of survival, and a refusal to be reduced to state-sanctioned definitions. In her hands, poetry becomes not just art, but a radical archive of those who move through the world with memory in their bones and resistance in their breath.

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