UTS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

Unpacking the Closet: Queer Disclosures from Bangladesh

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under the supervision of
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Certificate of Original Authorship

I, Anika Shah, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney. This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution. This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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I wrote most of this thesis upon the ancestral lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. I offer my respects to the Elders past, present, and emerging.

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Abstract

Unpacking the Closet is a project inspired by a curiosity about disclosures in the context of Bangladesh. What does 'coming out' mean, if anything at all, for queer Bangladeshi women? Through interviews and media analysis, this research investigates the ways that queer Bangladeshi women perceive their own identities in the midst of broader struggles over queer visibility, LGBTQIA+ rights, and gender equality in Bangladesh. In doing so, the project examines how the contemporary understanding of gender and sexual identity categories vary across the intersections of socio-economic class, social and geographical mobility, and generational shifts for queer Bangladeshi women.

In order to understand practices and representations of 'coming out' in Bangladesh, this study employs two methods: first, collecting narratives of lived experiences through semi-structured interviews with women in Bangladesh and the Bangladeshi diaspora; and second, critical engagement with the popular culture and online media that frames sexual and gender politics in the Bangladeshi public sphere. The research takes the paradigm of 'coming out of the closet' as a point of departure, and builds on scholars such as Eve Sedgwick and Carlos Ulises Decena, who propose concepts such as performative silence and tacit subjects, respectively, in establishing the subtleties and significance of context, especially cultural context, in exploring narratives of queer disclosures. It considers the inadequacies of established global identity categories and representations of queerness in communicating the experiences of queer Bangladeshi women.

The research draws on the works of Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and Ghassan Hage, incorporating the notions of queer emotions, cruel optimism, and existential immobility. It takes into account contemporary national discourses of development and womanhood, and traces how it collides with the aspirations of queer Bangladeshi women. The research demonstrates how such conflicts create forms of crisis and induce a sense of 'stuckedness' in them, compelling them to believe that a queer future is unavailable in Bangladesh and must be sought elsewhere. The research also tracks how causes of stuckedness travel across transnational spaces, changing form and continuing to affect the identities, kinship relations, future imaginaries, and senses of belongingness of queer Bangladeshi women.

Unpacking the Closet identifies frictions between established global markers of embodying gender and sexual identity categories and the lived experiences of queer Bangladeshi women. It attempts to fill up a research gap within a research gap – incorporating the routinely unheeded voices of queer women within an already underexplored field of gender and sexuality studies in Bangladesh – while prioritising the intricate minutiae, keeping in mind the proposition of Bruno Latour et al. that the whole is always smaller than its parts.

Introduction: Why Disclosures

Everyone has three lives: a public life, a private life, and a secret life.

– Gabriel García Márquez, in Gerald Martin's biography (2008)

Queer Disclosures: Key Research Questions

It is strange how tables often turn. I sit in front of my computer, and I take an interview. I log in from Sydney, Australia, and my participant logs in from Dhaka, Bangladesh. She sits five hours away on the Zoom window on my screen. We are virtually strangers, but we realise that there are common grounds between us. We discover that we went to the same school. The timelines are different, of course, but the experiences are more or less aligned. While she talks about her first love-affair with her best friend, I recount the events of my first crush. My first *proper* crush. We were in grade seven or eight, and she used to sit beside me. It was our assigned seat; the teacher had allocated it according to our alphabetised roll numbers. We were not friends, we were just two people destined to sit beside each other over the course of a year. And I had a crush on her. 'Did you realise that it was a crush?', my participant, Maha, asks. I say that I did. By then, I suppose, I really did. I thought she was intimidating, I thought she was cool. I, in turn, was not. I would observe her, and try out things that she talked about. In secret, of course. I would watch WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) and closely follow the career trajectory of John Cena. I would listen to songs of Ronan Keating, Brian Adams, and Avril Lavigne. I would try out a cursive handwriting because that is how she wrote. I would chew a lot of gum. 'You were smitten!', Maha exclaims. I suppose I was.

I did not know what heteronormativity was, I was not aware of its existence. But I suppose it hung around like the air we breathe. I had not felt anything like that for a boy at that time, and I thought it was because I went to an all-girls school. There were no boys around. But then there were boys around, and men, and I still liked women as well. Needless to say, I was rethinking my earlier hypothesis. It was in a moment of mutual disclosures such as this that I felt, yet again, that disclosures matter. What presumed secrets we share, and to whom, correlates to how we perceive our own selves, and how we portray it – curate it – in front of the world.

Inspired by a curiosity about disclosures, my thesis explores the concept of 'coming out of the closet' in the context of Bangladesh. What does 'coming out' mean – if anything at all – for queer Bangladeshi women? And how do they perceive their own identities in the midst of broader struggles over queer visibility, LGBTQIA+ rights, and gender equality in Bangladesh?

In order to find answers to the abovementioned questions, I have collected narratives of lived experiences of queer Bangladeshi women through semi-structured interviews and engaged with popular culture and online media. After delving in discussions with my eight participants – whom I will soon introduce in the next chapter – I was brought closer to a range of other topics. Some were deeply personal, such as ambiguous kinship relations, ambivalent thoughts on communities, and the uncertainties of imagining queer futures. Some, on the other hand, indicated concerns much broader, such as national discourses on development and womanhood, and the inadequacies of queer representations in popular culture. Taking 'coming out of the closet' as a point of departure, and investigating the nuances that influence this perception, has led me to examine how the contemporary understanding of gender and sexual identity categories vary across the intersections of socio-economic class, social and geographical mobility, and generational shifts for queer Bangladeshi women. In the rest of this thesis, I unpack the notion of the closet, and delve deeper into the frictions that exist between global queer discourses, national images of womanhood, and the lived experiences of queer Bangladeshi women.

Synopses of Chapters

Here I have introduced the key research questions that steer and structure this research. **Chapter 1** of this thesis unfolds in two parts. The first part provides a brief contextual review of the key concerns in Bangladeshi feminist and queer movements. I also elaborate on the phenomenon known as the 'Bangladesh Paradox', and show how the inner dynamics of Bangladesh, particularly regarding the social formations around gender and sexuality, often appear as paradoxes. Next, the Chapter introduces the key themes – 'coming out', 'stuckedness' and mobility, and queer futures – that frame and recur throughout this thesis. Finally, I touch upon the positioning and contribution of this

research. The second part of the chapter discusses the methodology for the research, followed by brief introductions of my participants.

Chapter 2 presents narratives of disclosures and how they unfolded in the lives of the research participants. The chapter is divided in three parts, each of which highlights three significant factors that influence my participants' thoughts and decisions regarding 'coming out': kinship, community, and representations in popular culture. The primary aim of the chapter is to illuminate on the friction between dominant global discourses and my participants' lived experiences regarding disclosures. I argue for the necessity of keeping in mind context – especially social and cultural context, but also specific personal contexts – in understanding narratives of queer disclosures. The Chapter illustrates, with reference to the experiences of my participants, the inadequacy of established global identity categories and representations of queerness in communicating the experiences of queer Bangladeshi women.

In **Chapter 3,** the thesis explores contemporary national discourses of successful Bangladeshi womanhood, and argue how they neither accommodate queer women, nor suggest alternative choices for them to pursue. The Chapter demonstrates that the conflict between national good-future fantasies and my participants' own aspirations for their future creates forms of ordinary everyday crisis for them and induces a feeling of impasse or 'stuckedness'. Such a feeling of stuckedness compels them to believe that a good queer future is not available for them in Bangladesh, and they must seek it elsewhere.

While Chapter 3 presents narratives from those who are based in Bangladesh and contemplate leaving, **Chapter 4** discusses those who have left. I inspect how causes of stuckedness discussed in Chapter 3 travel and translate transnationally, and continue to affect the identities, kinship relations, future imaginaries, and senses of belongingness of my mobile and diaspora participants. The Chapter shows that the causes of stuckedness do not necessarily dissipate as one moves; rather, they mutate, and new causes emerge, continuing to obstruct the desired queer futures of my participants.

The final chapter, **Chapter 5,** offers concluding remarks and suggest scope of further research into queer disclosures and the experiences of queer Bangladeshi women.

CHAPTER 1

WHY HERE, WHY WOMEN, WHY QUEER

This chapter unfolds in two parts. The first part presents a brief contextual review of the key concerns in Bangladeshi feminist and queer movements. There is a dissonance between these two strains of movements, and it affects the lived experiences of queer Bangladeshi women in multiple and intersecting ways. I also introduce and elaborate on what is known as the 'Bangladesh Paradox' – the juxtaposition of various frictions that exists in both the internal dynamics and the external perception of Bangladesh. Next, I introduce the key themes that frame and recur throughout this thesis – the concept of 'coming out of the closet', and notions of 'stuckedness', mobility, and queer futures. Finally, I touch upon the positioning and contribution of this research. In the second part of this chapter, I discuss the research methodology, followed by brief introductions of my participants.

Part 1: Context

There really is nothing more to say – except why.

But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.

— Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970)

A Brief Contextual Review

Feminist Concerns, Queer Concerns, and the Dissonance

While it is not imperative that there must be synergy between the terrains of feminist and queer politics, I wish to illustrate that there exists a particular dissonance between them in Bangladesh, and it affects the lived experiences of women in general, and queer women in particular. I begin by discussing the key concerns in feminist scholarship, followed by

the key concerns in queer scholarship, and highlight the points of disconnect and their effects.

Feminist movements and activism in Bangladesh has been diverse and vibrant throughout history. Sohela Nazneen (2017) and Firdaus Azim (2022) have accomplished the significant work of synthesising these movements across various points in history and tracing their evolution. They have also highlighted the current debates and challenges that have emerged in the last two decades. Nazneen, by dividing women's movements across the British period (1900-1947), the Pakistan period, (1947-1970), and the Bangladesh period (1972-present), has shown the priorities of feminist focus in each era. I explore only the history after 1971 (I have a justification for this decision in my positioning of the project later in this chapter), particularly with an emphasis on the last two decades. The most pressing issues in this period, as mentioned by Nazneen and Azim, have been women's political participation, mainstreaming of gender in public policies, economic empowerment, religious-personal law reforms, violence against women, and sex workers' rights. Each of these issues have been navigated by feminist organisations within the juncture of both wider national contexts and international development discourses. The positioning of women as a category itself, Azim argues, has been problematic in how they have been written into history, included in the formal documents of the state, and appropriated into the discourses of national development. Azim exemplifies each of these with particular references. I am interested in the third point of entry – the discourses of women's development, and how such discourses are circulated and perpetuated by the state and funded by external actors such as NGOs.

The idea of women's development soon became a marker of the nation's development. Azim links the inception of this event to the founding of organisations such as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and Gonoshasthya Kendra (GK), both of which inaugurated in 1972. This was soon followed by the UN Decade for Women's Development in 1975, and the founding of Grameen Bank in 1983. Organisations such as these were including women in their programs as workers, and working towards women's development. Discussions around issues such as microloans, household-based farming, nutrition, and family-planning brought about many positive changes in the attitude towards Bangladeshi women and transformed women's roles within the household. However, soon such efforts began to be characterised in global discourses as

'women in development', framing women's position as 'targets of development' in need to be reformed and improved (p. 3). Sultana Alam and Nilufer Matin (1984) made a similar observation that planned development after the Liberation War in 1971 gradually morphed into 'development as "business"', and interest in women emerged as a 'fashionable concern' in the 1970s as a biproduct of 'various UN and bilateral agencies to "include women in development"' (p. 2). As a result of the merging of these two events, literature on women in Bangladeshi soon began to be framed within the narrow focus of 'women and development'. A framing such as this proved to be restrictive and reductive – women were considered important not in and of themselves but because they were either a hindrance to development policies, or a potential site for implementing development policies.

I wish to clarify that my critique against development is not against development itself, but against the distance that exists between the *spectacle* of women's empowerment and the *lived reality* of women's empowerment. For instance, Azim points out that the RMG (ready-made garments) sector opened up the labour market for women, which in turn contributed greatly to the country's economy. However, the solidification of Bangladesh as a middle-income country relied on the cheap labour of women workers. Furthermore, alongside receiving low wages, women workers continued to be subjected to abuse and sexual harassment in their places of work (Ashraf 2017b). Meanwhile, garment workers were being referred to as the 'golden girls' (replacing the 'golden fibre' jute, from earlier decades) as the primary foreign currency earner for the nation (Siddiqi 2015, quoted in Chowdhury 2018, p. 61). I will pick up the discussion on women's empowerment again in Chapter 3, and build on how the broader national discourses of womanhood excludes queer women in Bangladesh.

Sohela Nazneen and Maheen Sultan (2012) offer an analysis of how this dubious intersection of national parameters of women's empowerment and broader discourses of development has created challenges for feminist activism in the last two decades. Based on empirical data collected from eight women's organisations in Bangladesh, they found two major and interrelated areas of concern – the 'NGO-ization' of feminist organisations, and the generational divide it has created between feminists (p. 87). By 'NGO-isation', Nazneen and Sultan refer to the process by which issues of women's collective concerns are transformed into isolated development projects without taking their social, political,

and economic contexts in account. Such a process promotes modes of organisational forms and practices that are based on neoliberal values. This tendency is not uncommon within South Asia in general, as Srila Roy (2012) points out. Roy connects it with the 'double entanglement' proposed by Angela McRobbie (2004) in relation to 'postfeminism' in the West, which I will address in the context of Bangladesh in Chapter 3.

The generational shift that Nazneen and Sultan refer to are connected with this 'NGO-isation'. Their investigation indicates that there is a generational divide between the feminists of the 1970s and the feminists who are in their twenties and thirties in the current time. Younger feminists have labelled this generational divide as a 'feminist impasse' (Siddiqi 2011, quoted in Nazneen and Sultan 2012, p. 97). This impasse is related to the differing views and attitudes of the feminists in different generations, and the ways that they choose to engage with feminist movements. The older feminists, who were leading autonomous feminists movements in the 1970s and had a movement-oriented (i.e., 'consciousness-raising and street agitation') focus are critical of the younger feminists for taking a more professionalised (i.e., 'gender and development oriented and projectized') approach to women's rights (p. 98). The younger feminists, on the other hand, the majority of whom are urban, middle-class students and professionals, argue that a professionalised approach does not necessarily imply that they have a lack of commitment towards feminism. The older feminists do not deny that – in fact, they both admit that the younger members came to understand feminism and gender issues in a completely different context, one which follows the 'NGO model of "doing gender" projects' (p. 98). This generational divide is interesting to me, and I will argue in Chapters 3 and 4 that such intergenerationally differing ideas of women's success obstructs the aspirations of my queer participants.

Queer women's sexualities have not been a focus of feminist movements in Bangladesh. Azim points out that the issues of gender and sexual minorities emerged as an extension of the sex worker's movements between 1991 to 1999. The focus, momentarily, shifted to the re-examining of gender and sexual categories. However, health issues driven by HIV/AIDS discourses gradually came to the foreground, and women's sexualities stopped becoming a matter of interest. In the aftermath of this, queer women continued to remain invisible, and queer men's movements and recognition of the *hijra* population came into light. Unfortunately, within the queer scene, which is predominantly urban and middle-

class, the dominant narratives became that of queer men, and queer women held a relatively marginal position (Ahmed 2016; Khan 2019; Karim 2014).

The queer scene too have been affected by the ambiguous nature of the state, and the ambivalent effects of development discourses. A critical reflection of the role of the state concerning queer individuals can be found in Adnan Hossain's (2017) research. In November 2013, the Government of Bangladesh took the policy decision to officially recognize the *hijra* – who are culturally considered as neither man nor woman – as a third gender. In 2014 a 'hijra pride' was launched by an NGO with support from foreign donors. In 2015, the Ministry of Social Welfare took the initiative to recruit hijras in low-ranking office jobs through interview. However, the interviews included a medical examination, and after the initial selection of twelve hijras it was concluded that all candidates were in fact male and not hijra, resulting in the termination of the appointments. In the backdrop of this incident emerged questions about the socio-cultural meaning, understanding, conceptualization, and construction of the third gender and the notion of authentic 'hijra-ness' in Bangladesh. Hossain illustrates that even though the legal recognition of the hijra as a third gender in Bangladesh gained praise both nationally and internationally as a progressive political and legal achievement, what remained concealed is a new discursive interpellation of the hijra as 'disabled' since they are perceived to be a special group of people who have genital defects and are delinked from sexual desire (p. 1419). This paradox of recognition, Hossain adds, emerges from complex set of interactions between four different actors: the civil society, the government, the international community, and the hijra themselves. For further reading into such cultural paradoxes and contradictions in the production of the hijra subject position in Bangladesh, see Hossain (2021). I will discuss the absence of queer women within queer activism and the dubious role of the state in Chapter 2 based on my conversations with my participant Taposhi who is a queer activist.

Much like the feminist scene, NGO-isation had impacted the queer scene in Bangladesh as well. The majority of the earlier studies about queer identities in Bangladesh are situated within sexual health and HIV/AIDS discourses endorsed by international NGOs and donors (Rashid et al. 2011; Siddiqi 2011). Such an emphasis, Dina M. Siddiqi (2011) points out, has yielded contradictory effects. On the one hand, it has opened up spaces for visibility, mobilisation, and resources; on the other hand, it has medicalised certain sexual

identities (*hijra* identities, in particular), while sidelining other concerns of sexually marginalised people. Furthermore, Siddiqi elaborates, the 'NGO-isation of cultural space', along with the 'increasingly globalized currency of particular modes of 'gay' culture', has largely affected the meanings and uses of identity categories related to sexualities (p. 2). She illustrates this tension by examining male sexual identity categories such as gay, *koti* ('effeminate' males, who feel like women inside and are sexually attracted to men) and MSM (men who have sex with men). Siddiqi discovers that alongside the variables of class, education, and exposure to global queer discourses, the intervention of NGOs play a crucial role in determining the self-understanding of queer men. She exemplifies this 'Ngo-isation of identities' with a half-jokingly made comment of a hijra respondent: 'If I go to NGO X, I call myself Hijra, at NGO Y, I'm Koti, and at NGO Z, I present myself as MSM' (p. 9). I will discuss queer articulations at length in Chapter 2, and demonstrate how my participants find themselves in a position of disadvantage where they feel a lack of connection to global identifying terms but do not find any viable local alternatives.

The queer scene in Bangladesh still managed to thrive despite contradictions such as these. Particularly in Dhaka after 1990, queer organisations like Boys of Bangladesh (BOB) and Roopbaan brought out publications, conducted surveys, and organised rallies to mobilise queer communities (Ahmed 2019). I have added a timeline of the highlights of queer activism in Appendix C. However, the momentum that these movements gained came to a halt after April 25, 2016, when some men posing as postal couriers entered the residence of Xulhaz Mannan, an openly gay queer activist, and murdered him and his friend Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy, another queer activist, with machetes. These murders occurred in succession after similar attacks in the near past by self-proclaimed Islamic militants who targeted publishers, bloggers, and alleged atheists. The incident urged members of the queer community to shut down their social media accounts, go underground, and even flee the country and seek asylum abroad (Siddiqi 2019). I will address the murders of Xulhaz and Tonoy again in Chapter 2. In the backdrop of this event, Siddiqi presented an intriguing insight on how a narrative of exceptionalism plays out in the global imaginary regarding Bangladesh – a development success story, a predominantly "Muslim 'but' secular" country, a country simultaneously menaced by underlying radical Islam (para. 2). Siddiqi asserted that the precarious nature of queer existence in Bangladesh cannot be reduced to merely a symptom of rising intolerance or

fundamentalism and should rather be situated within a broader framework – one that includes an authoritarian state, its historically ambivalent relation to religion, and the nation's structurally marginal transnational location.

I proposed earlier in this section that there is a lack of synergy between feminist and queer movements in Bangladesh. My understanding is that development discourses endorsed by NGOs and sanctioned by the state renders queer women – for lack of a better word – *uninteresting*. While women remain an interesting agenda to broader discourses of development and womanhood, and queer men and the *hijra* population take precedence in queer rights movements, queer women fall through the cracks. I cannot say why queer women remain marginal in both of these terrains, but I will reveal how it affects the lived experiences of my participants, and how these political frameworks influence their personal aspirations. In the next section, I will discuss the 'Bangladesh paradox'. I have used the words 'contradiction' and 'paradox' multiple times in this section. I believe that an understanding of such contradictions will enhance this investigation of queer women's experiences. In the next section I will elaborate on more paradoxes that are tied to Bangladesh, and how they affect the intersections of gender and sexuality.

The 'Bangladesh Paradox'

Paradoxes appear to be a constant feature of both the internal dynamics and the external perception of Bangladesh. Ali Riaz points out that Bangladesh has been known as a development puzzle in the media, being referred to with phrases such as the 'Bangladesh Paradox' or 'Bangladesh Conundrum' (2016, P. 3). On the one hand, the country is known for political instability, poor governance, violence, and natural disasters; on the other, it is known as a development success story. The true paradox, however, Riaz adds, is not that the country achieved noteworthy economic progress despite the abovementioned deterrents but that 'a huge incongruity exists between the popular aspiration and the reality, between hope and despair which arrive in quick succession' (p. 3). In his book, which examines such paradoxes in the political arena of Bangladesh, he presents even more paradoxes. One, for instance, is the debate over identity, particularly national identity underscored by religion and class (i.e., Bangladeshi as a national identity as

opposed to Bengali as an ethnic identity, or the secular identity as opposed to the Muslim identity). Another such example is the contradiction underlying the 'nature and quality of democracy' in the country, which is symptomatic of a 'hybrid regime' characterised by institutional features of both democracy and autocracy (p. 6).

I am inclined to claim that the paradox that Riaz speaks of in the arena of Bangladeshi politics exists in every other aspect of the country. I also propose that being mindful of such paradoxes can bring forth exciting nuances in explorations of gender and sexuality – something I will exemplify in the following paragraphs in reference to the works of Shelley Feldman (2001) and Shuchi Karim (2021). Furthermore, I propose that these paradoxes are not paradoxes but juxtapositions – existing not in opposition to each other but co-existing side by side.

Feldman's study operates within the intersections of gender, religion, and class. It begins with a reminiscence of her visit to Bangladesh in 1984 to conduct research on Bangladeshi garment workers. During her visit, Feldman observes that since her previous visit, within the span of eighteen months, women's visibility and mobility on the streets of Dhaka was far more noticeable than before. It makes her wonder what had changed: 'Was I mistaken? Did I remember incorrectly?' (p. 1097). Feldman ruminates on this change that occurred in the course of a mere eighteen months. There were some obvious factors, such as the growing number of garment factories, for instance, and the international recognition of Dhaka as an export-processing enclave. Feldman notes, however, that ironically women's participation in the export sector coincided with the rise of the fundamentalist religious party Jamaat-i-Islami. Since the early 1980s, they had played a substantial role in the Islamisation of politics, and were responsible for the rise in issuing *fatwas*, or formal ruling on a point of Islamic law, against women participating in nongovernment organisations (NGOs), export sectors, and more. Feldman attempts to trace how the concept of patriarchy was different in each case regarding households, religious veiling, and the public/private binarism. She finds that there are contradictory ways in which patriarchal gender relations are realised, and these women often use and subvert the notions of kinship and religion to their advantage. For instance, they use *bhai* (older brother) or *chacha* (uncle) to refer to male co-workers, and *apa* or *didi* (elder sister) to refer to senior female workers which desexualises workplace relations and redefines appropriate persons to interact with. Recasting strangers as kin thus allows them to

contest both Islamic discourses that constrain women and discourses about modern, 'immodest' women (p.1106, quotations added) who work in garment factories. Feldman observes a similar tactic regarding *purdah* or veiling as well. The choice to wear a veil appears to often be a strategic choice to redefine public space, have access to employment, negotiate new definitions of family honour, and even transform it as a source of power and control over men.

The paradoxes that exist within this intersection intrigued other researchers as well. Findings similar to Feldman's were also discovered by Elora Shehabuddin (2008). Her study explores how rural Bangladeshi women negotiate between the customary religion-based insistence on modesty and the need to work outside the home to sustain themselves and their families. Based on her findings, Shehabuddin argues that oftentimes ordinary, unlettered, and landless Muslim women – who are the easy targets of Islamists, NGOs, and secularists – use their particular understanding of Islam in a way that could be termed as 'subaltern rationality' (p. 5). Such an understanding not only allows them to make space for themselves in the traditionally male public sphere, but also allows them to dramatically alter it. Sarah C. White (2012) was also interested in the paradox of Bangladesh becoming at once "more modern' and 'more Islamic" (p. 1431). According to White, to think of it as a paradox, and to focus on the symbolic opposition between 'religion' and 'development', overlooks how both are accommodated pragmatically in everyday life. After all, she adds, the meaning that religion makes is not single but multiple, affected by numerous variables such as gender, age, location, and most importantly, class and education. Religion can be a 'part of the taken-for granted moral order', or a 'certain cultural style'; the same way that religious language does not always connote 'something specifically 'religious'' (p. 1455). For further reading of research that addresses similar tensions, see Taj I. Hashmi (2000).

Paradoxes exist within different intersections too. Shuchi Karim's work navigates the intersections of gender, sexuality, and class. In her investigation of the 'lived sexualities' of single middle-class women, she explores the ways in which her participants assert agency over their bodies and diverse desires while negotiating and resisting normative restrictions (2021, p. 11). Karim maintains that single women create pockets of subversion and resistance using the same norms that subjugate them. The struggle for acceptance as 'respectable yet free sexual beings', is different, she notices, for single

heterosexual women compared to single homosexual and bisexual women (p. 7). Unlike non-heterosexual women of a marriageable age, heterosexual women faced social taboos and restrictions in asserting their sexuality because of their desire to erotically engage with members of the opposite sex. Evidently, it becomes easier for non-heterosexual women to have erotic experiences with other women, in both private and public spaces, since homosociality remains a socially acceptable form of gender intimacy. The struggle here, Karim contends, is not for a sexually diverse identity but for the opportunity to express oneself as a sexual being without being condemned. At the same time, however, female same-sex identities and desires remain largely unrecognised, since sex is understood as penetrative in strictly heteronormative terms. I will refer to more of Karim's work in Chapters 2 and 3. Karim's findings are not too dissimilar from my participant Taposhi's remark, which she said jokingly:

> If me and my partner start kissing in the middle of the street, people will be like, they're such good friends. They'll just say we're really good friends, nothing more than that (laughs). Female sexuality itself is not recognised. People are weirded out by the fact that women can want to have sex without wanting to have a baby. Like, really? They want to have sex? And then two women having sex with each other, what kind of a concept is that? (laughs) That's why no one bothers women who are with other women. I mean, women have a lot of other problems to deal with. Just because they are women.

Contradictions remain constant; often one makes way for the other, often one clashes with the other and creates tension. The tensions indicated here are apparent: on the one hand there is an erasure of queer women's desires, on the other there is an opportunity created by the same oblivion that maintains the former. Taposhi's remark also indicates that there exists an array of issues, which, similar to a Venn diagram, are exclusive to either women, or queer women, or both.

I am particularly interested in such paradoxes, and the nuances they create. I have already mentioned that I am inclined to consider these paradoxes as not mere paradoxes but juxtapositions. Even though they appear like contradictions, the friction that they create emerges not because they contradict each other but because they co-exist in the same space, together. I borrow this idea from Annemarie Mol's 'Juxtaposition' (2016).

'Juxtaposition' is the introduction Mol wrote to the Japanese translation of her book *The Body Multiple* (2002). Before I begin elaborating on juxtaposition, I must first summarise the story that was the inception of this concept for Mol. In the text, Mol recounts the academic year she spent in Paris. While in Paris, she met Hajime, a fellow student whose room was a few doors away from Mol's in the student housing. Mol came from the Netherlands, Hajime from Japan. He introduced her to green tea and her first red bean cakes. But what Mol found to be the most striking is the story Hajime told her about his grandfather. Each morning, Hajime's grandfather would pray in front of a Buddhist shrine, and each evening he would worship in a Shintoist temple. Thus, he would move between two very different spiritual traditions. There are various ways that these two traditions clash with each other, but Hajime's grandfather did not seem to mind. In fact, engaging in both Buddhist prayers and Shintoist worships greatly enriched his life.

This story was a revelation for Mol (and later on, for me as well) because at the time she was not familiar with the notion that one could juxtapose practices related to different spiritual traditions. To her, it did not just defy monotheistic religious traditions but also Western philosophy, where contradictions are taken very seriously: 'Surely, if A is right, non-A, its opposite, cannot be right as well?' (para. 5). According to Mol, the story of Hajime's grandfather was 'an elegant departure to the idea that one has to adhere either to this belief or that' and also 'an equally elegant departure of seriously stable identities that invite one to say *I am Buddhist* or rather *I am Shintoist*' (para. 5). *Being* is supposed to endure, says Mol, but *doing* allows for more variety. The morning and the evening are different moments in time, after all. 'Why would what you practice one moment clash with, or contradict, what you do some time later?' (para. 5).

There are two points Mol makes that helps me. Firstly, of course, her emphasis on the word practice. Practice is a crucial term here, she points out. Once it is established that *doing*, rather than *being*, allows for more variety, it becomes easier to imagine that different understandings of reality do not necessarily clash in practice, and in fact, they coexist. The second point is that of multiplicity. Mol's book is an ethnography of a university hospital in the Netherlands. The different departments of the hospital, she illustrates, stage reality differently, and therefore enact different realities:

> In the outpatient clinic a doctor talks with patients about what exactly troubles them in their daily life. In the operation theatre, by contrast, anesthetists silence patients with drugs and surgeons use knives to cut open their bodies. In one location the patient is treated as a person to talk with, in the other the patient is enacted as a body to intervene in, either physiologically (with drugs) or anatomically (with knives). (para. 9)

This is where Mol points out a contradiction about contradictions: while Western traditions strive to preach a single reality and tell the singular and univocal truth about it, Western practices do not treat reality as such. There, reality comes in different *versions*. Which is fine, Mol clarifies. But, her issue with such a situation is that this multiplicity tends to be hidden, and when asked about it (i.e., '*which* version of reality to live *when* and *where*'), the answers tend to be stealthy (para. 10). Mol's multiplicity is not the same as plurality, she warns us of that. The argument of her book is that diseases, bodies, and realities come in *versions*. But just because contrasting versions of realities are practiced in the hospital, the hospital does not fall apart into isolated sections. She debunks another Western 'obsession' here: 'the idea that reality is composed of separable entities that may be added together (as the stones in a wall), but that do not mix (as the ingredients in a dish)' (para. 11). Because Mol distinguishes between the two, she sketches a reality that is not plural but multiple.

The multiplicity that Mol speaks of, and the notion of juxtaposition that she proposes, I argue, proves to be particularly significant in my investigation of the lived experiences of queer Bangladeshi women. Given that there exist many such apparent paradoxes regarding both feminist and queer concerns in Bangladesh, being mindful of them will help reveal how they speak to broader concerns such as queer visibility and LGBTQIA+ rights, as well as inter-generational shifts in aspirations and mobility.

Key Themes

'Coming Out'

My interest in queer disclosures in the forms of 'coming out' or 'coming out of the closet' originates from observing its centrality in LGBTQIA+ discourses. Eve Sedgwick (2008)

prioritises the metaphor of 'the closet', stating that it functions as a structuring metaphor in Western queer culture, and it correlates to the plurality and power of both knowledge and ignorance. While a dominant theme in Western queer culture, the concept of 'coming out' has travelled across the globe and now holds a significance place in queer cultures elsewhere. The meaning it creates in the lives of queer individuals and the position it occupies in queer popular culture and global discourses, also, continues to shift and multiply.

The moment of coming out is often deemed a moment of queer authenticity, an essential element of queer experience. Whitney Monaghan (2016) shares, in her discussion of queer representations, that film and television led her to believe coming out would be 'a climactic and defining moment, an 'affirmation' of her identity as a queer person (p. 1). Hongwei Bao (2013), in his autoethnographic exploration of "Chineseness" as a queer diaspora, shares his moment of disclosure to his mother. It was 'Cartesian dualism and western gay rights discourse' he recalls, that influenced him to think that 'it would be dishonest and insincere not to come out' (p. 132). Amy Brainer (2018) discusses coming out in the context of Taiwan, and how its gravity has amplified across generations. She discovers that younger queer people in Taiwan have a pathway planned for coming out (i.e., getting an education, getting a job, gaining financial independence from their parents, and finally disclosing their sexuality). The older queer people, on the other hand, mentioned that they 'never planned to come out' (p. 925).

Coming out discourses are also connected to queer representations and visibility. As Brian A. Horton (2017) discusses, while investigating queer disclosures in India in the backdrop of global discourses on coming out, 'visibility via verbal disclosure' remains central in discourses of queer rights and recognition – 'queers are compelled to be talking subjects, those who are "out and proud"' (p. 1060). Coming out narratives circulate in popular culture and on social media. I came across numerous memorable stand-up comedy skits based on coming out stories on YouTube and Instagram throughout the duration of this research. Irene Tu (2023) shares coming out to her mother at the age of 19: 'I go, "Mom, I'm gay", and she goes, "I know, look at your hair'. Gina Yashere (2018) shares coming out to her mother – a double disclosure, as she tells her she is becoming a comedian *and* she is a lesbian. Her mother says, 'What are you telling me? You're telling me my daughter is a *gay clown*?' There are ample TED Talks on coming out as well, sharing

experiences and advice. Amanda Gundel's (2018) talk, for example provides advice on how to come out, in five '(not so) easy' steps.

As coming out narratives begin to surface in popular culture and social media, it becomes gradually apparent that the media not only portrays this discourse but also mediates them. In the context of coming out videos becoming increasingly popular on YouTube, Sander De Ridder and Frederik Dhaenens (2019) examine how media cultures shape and regulate the meanings of these videos in queer youth culture, and argue that they can be seen in relation to how media authenticates value in the form of symbolic capital to coming out stories. Danielle Bobker (2015) exemplifies based on advertisements, TV shows, and websites how there can be '"real" and mediated forms of coming out', and that the role of the media in this regard is often related to the rise of the 'gay and lesbian niche market' (pp. 33-35).

Alongside the media and the 'gay and lesbian niche market', nation-states intervene and even appropriate queer cultures. The politics of queer representations and visibility, thus, often becomes a tool of governance. Jasbir Puar's (2007) notion of 'homonationalism' demonstrates how the rhetoric of sexual liberation was used in US nationalist discourses during the war on terrorism. Gayatri Gopinath (2021) cautions that a queer studies project in the current times must be conscious that non-normative gender and sexual formations can no longer be considered inherently transgressive, as they can be 'conscripted into nationalist projects' (p. XV).

Bangladesh is not detached from global queer discourses, and my participants are not exempt from popular discourses of coming out. K, for instance, shares that they were under the impression that coming out was a requirement for them, they felt 'stuck on coming out'. Yasmin recalls encountering the phrase 'coming out' in American TV shows, Taposhi points out that there are coming out videos on TikTok. Roshni mentions being aware of the appropriation of pride flags by corporations. While she appreciates individuals putting up pride flags in solidarity, she remains critical of pride apparels in chain department stores: 'It feels gimmicky, like it's pandering to a specific audience in order to get more money'. Aranya Ratri (2020) shares resources in Bangla about coming out on the Mondro website. Traces of the entanglement between the state and queer

communities and movements occur in Bangladesh too. It surfaces in the paradox of recognition of the *hijra*, it solidifies in the backdrop of the 2016 murders.

With a consciousness of the popularity of global coming out discourses, their presence in popular culture, and the interconnectedness of their many implications, I explore this metaphor in the context of Bangladesh. Taking coming out as a point of departure, in Chapter 2, I illuminate on several interconnected issues in the lives of my participants: queer articulations, kinship relations, community belongingness, and engagement with representations. Building on scholarship on the concept of coming out, I attempt to identify the frictions that exist between dominant global discourses and the lived experiences of queer Bangladeshi women, and reveal how the queer disclosures of my participants align with, deviate from, and complicate the popular imaginary of 'coming out'.

'Stuckedness', Mobility, and Queer Futures

I have already discussed that there are numerous apparent paradoxes that exist in the arenas of feminist and queer politics in Bangladesh. I proposed that the friction they create emerges not because they contradict each other, but because they co-exist. Within this context of contradictory juxtapositions, more frictions emerge regarding queer disclosures, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 2. These frictions between broader discourses and the personal experiences of my participants affect their self-understanding of queerness, their relationship with family and community, and the points of references that they come across in popular culture. The next inevitable question that arises from that point onwards is how they envision their futures when their present circumstance contain such interconnected complexities.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I explore the future aspirations of my participants. I identify tensions between the global, the national, and the personal. My participants, I discover, remain torn between national images of Bangladeshi womanhood – which are framed by development discourses and fuelled by neoliberal feminism – and their personal desires for queer futures. I illustrate this tension by building on the works of Elora Halim Chowdhury (2018) and Suborna Camellia (2021) as they examine contemporary national discourses of 'new women' and 'good future' in Bangladesh. A disconnect comes into view

between the national image of women's empowerment, which emphasises heteronormative happiness (i.e., marriage and children) and economic success, and the aspirations of queer Bangladeshi women, who realise that such an image does not accommodate them. The notion of successful womanhood, thus, appears to invoke optimism, but morphs into cruel optimism from my participants. I borrow Lauren Berlant's (2011) notion of cruel optimism here, which occurs 'when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (p. 1). This relation of cruel optimism manifests in forms of ordinary everyday crisis in the lives of my participants, and induces in them a feeling of 'stuckedness'.

I borrow the theme of 'stuckedness' from Ghassan Hage (2009). According to Hage, stuckedness stems from a sense of existential immobility – the opposite of existential mobility, which is a form of imaginary mobility evoking the sense that one is 'going somewhere' (p. 97). This sense of 'going somewhere' is important, Hage tells us, as one feels well when they feel that they are moving well. Existential mobility is one such imagined or felt movement. And in relation to migration, Hage argues, one engages in a physical form of mobility because they are after existential mobility. In this sense, migration becomes an act inspired by the search for a space that makes possible the feeling of movement or going somewhere, as opposed to the feeling of stuckedness or going nowhere. My Dhaka-dwelling participants, as I will show in Chapter 3, continue to feel stuck, and constantly envision leaving, as their imagination of a queer future seems impossible in Bangladesh. In Chapter 4, it will become evident that stuckedness itself is mobile. The elements that induce stuckedness in my Dhaka-dwelling participants and compel them to leave also travel transnationally and continue to affect my participants who are on the move and in the diaspora. The continuum of stuckedness, mobility, and queer futures, thus, offer a spatio-temporal perspective on the lives of queer Bangladeshi women.

Positioning the Project: Research Gap, Rationale, and Contribution

An essential motivation that drives this project is the desire to identify the frictions between established global markers of embodying gender and sexual identity categories and the lived experiences of queer Bangladeshi women. Based on the contextual review

above, it is evident that within feminist politics and movements in Bangladesh, queer women's sexualities have not received particular priority. Simultaneously, within queer movements, queer women's voices and concerns have remained marginal. I wish to place my research in a position that addresses this gap. I wish to fill up a research gap within a research gap – incorporating the routinely unheeded voices of queer women within an already underexplored field of gender and sexuality studies in Bangladesh. Furthermore, I wish to do this in a way that emphasises the little things, the intricate minutiae, keeping in mind the proposition of Bruno Latour et al. (2012) that the whole is always smaller than its parts. In doing so, I, firstly, consider the continuum of history, geography, and politics of the site that is Bangladesh, and secondly, connect the nuances of these site-specific concerns to broader global discourses. The final aim is to tie these two strands together and let them communicate, while incorporating other sets of scholarship, such as feminist studies of popular culture, emotion, affect, and phenomenological anthropology.

I must at this stage assert – decision-making regarding site has been a complicated matter throughout the writing of this thesis. My initial intention was to not focus on Bangladesh in isolation but to place it within the broader context of South Asia. However, it was soon apparent that in South Asian feminist and queer scholarship, Bangladesh appeared to come as an afterthought, and the majority of the discussions centred around India. This Indo-centricity has not remained unnoticed or unaddressed. Hossain (2021), in his study of hijras, mentions the spatio-intellectual hegemony of India in South Asian studies of gender and sexuality. Srila Roy (2012), too, has pointed out the hegemony exercised by India within South Asia, be it through economic imperialism or political manoeuvring, which hinders the possibility of a shared pan-South Asian identity. My participants seemed to notice this disparity as well. Both Zainab and Roshni mentioned that searching for information on queer culture in South Asia usually yields results on India, not so much on Bangladesh. K, in particular, said that my recruitment flyer caught their attention because it was specifically asking for Bangladeshi participants, not South Asian participants, which they experienced was more common.

A situation similar to this disparity was observed by Shawna Tang (2017) as well – a work that has supported my site-related decisions. Tang noticed that Singapore was largely missing as a case study in Asian queer studies as opposed to, for instance, Japan, Thailand,

and Taiwan. Tang made two interrelated points in this context. Firstly, queer identities around the world have been 'overwhelmingly queered in Anglo-American ways', be it in popular culture or in dominant theories (p. 6). And secondly, even when projects wish to endorse a counter to this, there is often an impulse to self-Orientalise, operating within a limited set of binaries and looking for essential differences. In Tang's example, a practice such as this ends up producing a homogenous account of Asia, where Singapore appears to be assimilated as an extension of the other countries mentioned above. This is why, Tang argues, Singapore has been missing from the queer Asia critique. She proposes to bring forth 'an analysis that troubles the Asia-West binary' (p. 10), and suggests a re-queering of lesbian women in postcolonial Singapore 'in such a way that local lesbian identities can be poised to interrogate, rather than merely imitate, the putative global gay' (p. 14).

While I cannot claim that the absence of Singapore in interrogations of sexualities in Asia and the absence of Bangladesh in that of South Asia stem from the same cause, Tang's argument influenced me to conduct site-specific research vis-à-vis Bangladesh. Managing my routes of travel, thus, enabled me to simultaneously concentrate my focus on Bangladesh and follow ideas of intrigue elsewhere. Tang's text has also encouraged me to embrace intersectionality as a more suitable approach for this project as opposed to decoloniality, particularly since Bangladesh has been decolonised twice, first from the British rule in 1947 and then from the Pakistani rule in 1971, further complicating the social formations around identities here (Guhathakurta and Schendel 2013). In this research, therefore, I choose to focus on the social formations that took precedence after 1971, and focus on the intersectionalities therein. Patricia Hill Collins (2019) maintains that there is a need for relational thinking within intersectionality, and such thinking can assist in combining components that are similar yet distinctive, bring forth new questions and perspectives, theorise the connection between different discourses, and reference in-between spaces between them. Both my scholarly predecessors, as referenced in earlier sections of this chapter, and my participants, have motivated me in being mindful of the relationality between the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, religion, and mobility in Bangladesh today. Such an awareness, I believe, will, allow this research to find its place within broader discussions of global queer discourses in the current times.

Part 2: Methodology

In order to have a conversation with someone you have to reveal yourself.

– James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961)

Methodology

This is a qualitative case-study based research. I have collected narratives of lived experiences through semi-structured interviews with women in Bangladesh and the Bangladeshi diaspora. I have supplemented it with critical engagement with popular culture and online media that frame sexual politics in the Bangladeshi public sphere to illuminate on themes embedded in the interview materials. The interviews took place in two phases over the period of three years. The first phase was between late 2020 to late 2021. Unfortunately, the first phase also coincided with the COVID-19 lockdowns. Given that I set out to take interviews during peak pandemic, Zoom was my only resort. On the one hand, Zoom allowed me to expand my search. Alongside participants within Bangladesh, I also attempted to reach out to Bangladeshi women based elsewhere. On the other hand, however, it ensured that my target demographic would have to be limited to women primarily accessible through social media and online platforms – a compromise that I had to accept. I learned that such a result is not unusual in virtual qualitative research during moments of crisis. A similar situation is recorded by Tungohan and Catungal (2022) regarding their Zoom-based interviews of Asian international students in Canadian universities. They discovered that while this approach allowed them to widen their pool of possible study participants and be more mindful of the complex nature of immigration trajectories, it was still inadequate for those who are less comfortable with or have less access to new technologies and digital connectivity.

In my recruitment of participants, I simultaneously employed arm's length recruitment and snowball sampling, while requesting the support of queer communities and organisations in Bangladesh, Australia, Canada, the UK, and the USA. I fashioned a flyer (see Appendix B) with relevant information regarding the research, alongside my contact details, to be circulated online, especially on personal, community, and organisation social media platforms, primarily on Facebook and Instagram. Within the span of six months, I

was contacted by five interested participants with whom I had no previous connection. I had personally sought out one participant, who was a friend of mine. Another participant, who was an acquaintance, expressed her interest in being interviewed after I had asked for her assistance in finding more participants. The final participant was the executive director of a Bangladeshi queer organisation, whom I had reached through long-winding serendipitous avenues. In the end I had eight participants – a good number for engaging in in-depth conversations with over the course of the research. Four of them are currently based in Bangladesh, two of them are international students in Central Europe, and two of them are first generation immigrants in Canada and the USA respectively. The ages of the participants range between twenty-five to thirty-two years. All of the participants come from Muslim religious and cultural backgrounds and almost all could be categorised as economically and/or socially middle-class. The distributions around age, class, and religion of the participants were not an intentional part of the research design; they had emerged organically.

This would be a good place to signal that the title of this chapter is slightly misleading, since not all of my participants identify with the labels of women and queer. While I used the phrase 'queer women' in my recruitment flyer, and I was approached in the basis of that identifier, it became clearer in conversation that not all my participants adopted the label without contestation. For instance, K identifies as trans and non-binary and prefers they/them pronouns. However, K was raised as a cisgender woman, and was interested in sharing their experiences of moving between gender identity categories. I will elaborate on articulations of sexual identity categories in Chapter 2, and justify my choice of using 'queer' as an umbrella term within that context. I am aware that using queer as an umbrella term runs the risk of imposing homogeneity. Gloria Anzaldúa warns us of using queer as a 'false unifying umbrella' (cited in McCann & Monaghan 2020, p. 10). While it does provide a sense of unity, it often erases differences across race, ethnicity, and class. However, for this project, queer proves to be more appropriate and versatile compared to, for instance, LGBTQIA+. As Dennis Altman reminds us, the acronym often 'conflates both biological and cultural understandings of sexuality and gender', and can also flatten differences between how these categories are understood, particularly in non-western contexts (cited in McCann & Monaghan 2020, pp. 10-11). Not being able to include queer women across different religious cultures, socio-economic backgrounds,

and indigenous and ethnic minority contexts was a missed opportunity due to both temporal and spatial limitations: the general uncertainty of the pandemic made it unfeasible to make long-term plans of data collection and travelling for fieldwork. Not including the *hijra* demographic, however, was an intentional exclusion. I realised that to include a topic with such complexity called for a level of engagement with the community and commitment of fieldwork that was beyond the scope of this research. Instead of potentially presenting with the problem of *speaking for* them rather than *speaking to* them (Alcoff 1991), I established a delimitation for myself. I am aware, following Alcoff's argument, that refraining from *speaking for* others can sometimes produce and perpetuate silences. However, a cause of reassurance in this case is a comprehensive account on the *hijra*s in Bangladesh by Adnan Hossain (2021), whom I will briefly refer to again in an upcoming paragraph.

In terms of ethics, all my participants were presented with participant information sheets and consent forms prior to the Zoom interviews. I ensured that all their personal details will be kept confidential and de-identified, unless they explicitly request otherwise. Everyone was given a pseudonym, which I took the liberty of choosing. The details of de-identification, however, were consulted with them. Throughout the course of the research, all the participants had an active involvement (via emails, WhatsApp, Messenger, Instagram, phone calls, and later face to face) in regulating which information is to be shared, in what form, and to what extent. While I had prepared a list of sample interview questions (see Appendix B), as is characteristic in semi-structured interviews, the flow of questioning corresponded to the nature of conversation with each participant. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated where appropriate as there was fairly frequent code-switching between Bangla and English. I shared the interview transcripts with the participants for a final review.

The Zoom interviews went smoothly, even with conflicts in availability of schedule, differences across time zones, and general internet trouble. I was curious to speak to known people about hitherto unknown aspects of their lives, and equally as elated to speak to those whom I had not previously known because of the added element of mystery. I was careful to not let conflicts of interest arise in scenarios where the participants were known to me. I did so by being forthcoming about self-disclosures around my own identity and experiences – a feminist strategy deemed by Yost and

Chmielewski (2012) since it restructures power and hierarchy between the researcher and the researched. In fact, while my participants did not always show eagerness in knowing the details of my sexuality, I remained open in discussing it to create a space of trust and a sense of kinship. I also discovered that there is a therapeutic aspect of anonymous interviews. One of my participants, Maha, confessed that the interview was 'like therapy'. Another, Nusrat, saw it as an opportunity to help process her trauma from a previous abusive relationship – a 'personal agenda' that encouraged her to agree to do the interview. The interviews helped me too, as they led me to discover unexpected things about my own subjectivity and positionality as a researcher while speaking with, and listening to, my participants – something that I will elaborate further on in the following paragraphs.

The second phase of collecting data took place between December 2022 to January 2023. I took a short trip of thirty-five days to Dhaka, Bangladesh after the lockdowns lifted. I met four of my Dhaka-based participants – Maha, Nusrat, Sraboni, and Taposhi – during my trip. The opportunity of a face-to-face follow-up, as well as my own experience of going back home, made a drastic shift within the methodology, not only in terms of the methods applied but also in terms of how the field notes are written.

In terms of conducting and writing the follow-up interviews and field notes, I utilised Kale Bantigue Fajardo's method of 'situated travelling fieldwork' from his work on Filipino maritime and migrant masculinities (2011, p. 32). In his attempt to interview Filipino seamen in the port cities of Manila and Oakland, Fajardo realised that the best way to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in a port city is to go to the port and talk to the seamen whose ships are docked there. While the ships are docked, the seamen either tend to their other duties or take a break, depending on their position. Which is why the duration of his interviews vary from a few minutes up to one hour, taken while the seamen ate their meals or smoked a cigarette on deck. Fajardo also had longer conversations with seamen who were back from sea, but the shorter conversations proved to have their own place and significance. A crucial difference between Fajardo's context and mine, of course, is that my participants were not travelling, I was. And the fact that I was travelling back to the very city where I spent my entire life, only added an embodied dimension of how I felt 'homecoming' and how I chose to write about it. Another thing that I borrow from Fajardo is the mode of writing that he uses, which is the 'narrative "collage"' (p. 37). The idea of

narrative collage, which Fajardo borrows from James Clifford, suggests that no single writing style can handle every type of research situation or academic inquiry. He suggests that a combination or collage of writing styles is often necessary and appropriate. Fajardo, thus, uses an array of methods and modes of writing in his work. Taking that as an inspiration, I allowed myself to write in a narrative collage that includes a juxtaposition of integrated literature review and theories, excerpts and analysis from interviews, parallels from popular culture, and autoethnographic documentation of field notes. This helped me to put into words numerous encounters and incidents that were simultaneously observed, analysed, and felt.

Field notes from my follow-ups with participants were not recorded and written entirely by hand. I ran them by my participants later to ensure that they were comfortable with the end result. Meeting with my participants gave me the opportunity to further cultivate a relationship of trust, respect, mutual understanding, and friendship. Their contribution not only reflected in the stories that they shared with me but also in the resources that they shared with me. Taposhi, for instance, shared an article with me that she thought may be useful for my work. Zainab, too (even though we have never met in person), shared a piece of writing that she thought would be of help. My relationship with my participants thus grew enough to continue well beyond the period of this research.

The decision to include autoethnography was taken during my trip to Dhaka. I realised that while my research was about my participants and their experiences, I was not exempt from it. Firstly, my field was my home, and my fieldwork was also my homecoming. Alison Rooke (2010) speaks of a similar experience while conducting ethnographic participant observation to investigate the experiences of working-class lesbian and bisexual women in London. She speaks of 'the fiction of the field being *elsewhere*' (p. 29). When one's field is close to home, fieldwork can problematise the idea of the field as a space/place that is physically and temporally bound. The edges of the field become blurry as the ethnographer navigates the 'constant crossing between the 'here' and 'there' (p. 30). Upon returning home, my field became permeable, and a separation between the field and myself proved to be difficult. Secondly, there were similarities between me and my participants. I was categorically the same as them: woman, Bangladeshi, bisexual, Muslim, and within the same age range. I was also phenomenologically the same as them: belonging to Dhaka and experiencing it with all its contradictions. The space between me

and my participants became significantly smaller as it became apparent that we were both navigating – and embodying – the fatigue of combating the same existential experiences: stuckedness, crisis ordinariness, and uncertain futures (I will discuss more of this in Chapters 3, 4, and 5). Rooke's work offers insight regarding this as well. She, too, had 'embodied situatedness' in the subject positions of 'working class' and 'lesbian', providing her with shared understanding of the experiences of her participants (p. 33). For scenarios such as this, Rooke proposes a queering of ethnography, which operates from a place of self-reflexivity that pays attention to the researcher's own subjectivity, positionality, and embodiment.

Once I went back home to the site of my research and met my participants, I realised that I no longer could, nor wanted to, keep my own subjectivity and embodied situatedness in detachment. So, I allowed myself to be introspective and self-reflexive: welcoming autoethnographic accounts where it occurred organically, and practising restraint where it did not seem befitting. The version of autoethnography that I use in both writing my field notes and relaying the stories of my participants is perhaps best aligned with what Adams and Jones (2011) refer to as 'reflexively queer autoethnography' (p. 108). The purpose of such a reflexivity – both as an orientation to research and as a practice of writing – is to merge the method of autoethnography and the paradigm of queer theory to accomplish a humble task: that of storytelling. The purpose of my self-reflexivity is precisely that: to connect with the experiences of my participants, to add something to their narratives, and to tell their stories effectively as well as affectively. The field notes, and my own experience of homecoming, are particularly affective and embodied, and are therefore written like literary vignettes. I found the inspiration for this particular stylistic manner of writing from Loretta (formerly Benny) LeMaster, who offers 'experimental autoethnographic tales of ambiguous embodiment' while sharing their multiracial experience of coming out and coming home (2014, p. 51). I will discuss more of this piece in Chapter 2.

Similar instances of being queerly self-reflexive in the field are evident in the works of Bangladeshi scholars as well. Adnan Hossain (2021), for example, discusses methodological entanglements in his work on cultural paradoxes and contradictions in the production of the *hijra* subject position in Bangladesh. While conducting fieldwork in Hridoypur, a pseudonymous slum in Dhaka, between 2008 and 2009, Hossain engaged

mainly in participant observation to collect his data. The line between his personal life and his professional ethnographic interest soon began to blur due to his regular visits and prolonged presence in Hridoypur. The majority of hijras thought that he was a lover of one of the hijra leaders. If not entangled with the leader, surely, he was a *parik* – the hijra word for a partner or husband – to someone. They refused to accept that Hossain was interested merely in research. The more he tried to clarify his position, the more they became firm in their belief that perhaps he was indeed a lover but a secretive one, visiting occasionally and staying away at other times. The possibility of a presumed romance did help him in approaching new hijra groups to collect data. However, his refusal to engage in sexual activities with them led many to think that perhaps Hossain was a hijra himself, hiding behind the guise of a man. The fact that he was *pakki* – the hijra expression for someone who is deeply aware and trained in hijra practice and values – only made the suspicions stronger. Hossain entered the field 'as a male-born, male-identified, middle-class subject in Bangladesh', but his subject-position shifted drastically depending on the socio-spatial location of his encounters with hijras, particularly in Hridoypur (p. 20).

Another such example is Hasan Ashraf (2017a), who presents ethnographic accounts of the experience of work in garments industries in Bangladesh. He shows how the interconnected relations of authority, inequality, gender, and class are re-created within the shop floors of the garments industry by managers, supervisors, and the workers themselves, all shaped by demands from global corporations in order to yield faster and cheaper productions of garments. Ashraf presents data collected by conducting ethnographic research after working in Asha Garments (pseudonym), a factory run by an acquaintance, for six months between 2010 to 2011. Even though his main method of choice is participant observation, his subjectivity blends in with the rest of the workers as he carries on working first as a helper at the sewing machines and then as an assembly line quality checker. A striking discovery that comes from his investigations is how all the actors within the factories create a distinct world – a 'garment-world' – which runs by the rules of 'garment-time' (p. 84). It is separated from the rest of the world, and as easy as it is to enter it, an exit is hard to come by. There comes a point in Ashraf's essay where he presents a prolonged lecture delivered by the production manager (PM). At the end of the lecture, the PM urges everyone to touch the floor of the factory and swear, in the name of Allah, to work "properly". As everyone bends over to touch the ground, a co-worker stops

Ashraf: 'Suddenly, the operator Shima, whose helper I was on that day, looked at me slightly shaking her head, winking and whispering, "don't touch the floor. If you touch, you will be trapped and then become obliged to follow his orders. You do not have to recite what he says, just hum. Don't touch the ground. He won't read your mind or see you!"' (p. 93). Needless to say, he followed her advice and only pretended to take the vow, thus saving his soul from the sinister grip of the garment-world. In another essay, Ashraf (2017b) considers *chaap* (pressure) and *bhoy* (fear) in the context of the garments labour process – something that I will refer to in Chapter 3. I must point out that neither of these two scholars use the term 'autoethnography' when they recount these incidents, which demonstrates that being queerly self-reflexive in the field is often an organic occurrence.

I must refer back to Mol here again, since the design of Mol's book contributes to the design of my thesis. Mol's book is multiple, both in terms of content and structure – a juxtaposition of two texts that run in parallel. The first tells stories about the hospital, the second combines the literature that informs Mol's writing. The juxtaposition is visually unmissable, as the first section runs vertical and the second runs horizontal in two columns. But the two texts are not separate, Mol reminds us: 'they pursue the same argument and seek to develop the same intervention in theory' (para. 12). The decision to juxtapose different versions of lived experiences, including my own, as well as detours to discuss popular culture, is to allow the messy multiplicity in this research to sit comfortably beside each other, and perhaps communicate. While my juxtaposition is not as visually exciting as that of Mol's, it certainly attempts to replicate it in essence. The goal of the different methodological elements is the same: to orchestrate an ensemble that pursues the same goal, which is an exploration of the experiences of queer Bangladeshi women. Much like Hajime's grandfather, I too wish to practice different methodological traditions at different times of the day. And much like Hajime's grandfather, I too am just one person, as is this not two but one thesis.

Glimpses of Fajardo's situated travelling ethnography and Mol's juxtaposition reflect in the way I engage with theories as well. As it will become apparent throughout this thesis, I travel, quite a bit, between theories. Much like my participants, I too experience stuckedness, and therefore demonstrate a restlessness in searching for, finding, reading, and engaging with theories from various locations. I juxtapose scholarly texts from

Bangladesh with scholarly texts from elsewhere. Situating does not only mean where one is but also includes where one comes from and where one may go, as Mol establishes while discussing subjectivities (2008). Site may remain static, situatedness is often not. While the primary site of my research is situated in Bangladesh, I am currently not in Bangladesh, neither are half of my participants. In fact, almost all of my participants, and myself, find some form of mobility in our collective lived experiences in the current times. Because we travel, my theories travel too. The refusal to remain in the same place, and the refusal to stick to the same methods and theories, thus, essentially queers my methodology. And in the process of doing that, I hope to not only situate the elsewhere-theories within Bangladesh, but enhance the theories with the addition of a Bangladeshi context as well.

Regarding theoretical situatedness and travelling, there are two particular limitations in this thesis that I would like to address. Firstly, I realised that access to literature in Bangla language is difficult to find outside of Bangladesh. Since I conducted my research during the pandemic, and my fieldwork in Dhaka lasted a short period of time, this is an avenue that I could not explore. I visited the office of the University Press Limited (UPL), a prominent academic publishing house in Bangladesh, and the library of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), a leading feminist organisation in the country. I sources some scholarly texts on Bangladesh and Bangladeshi women from UPL and some archival materials from BMP. However, I did not come across any texts on queer Bangladeshi women. It led me to believe that locating information on queer Bangladeshi women within Bangla-language literature requires considerable time and effort – both of which I could not invest at the time. I remain conscious that there are valuable scholarly texts on Bangladeshi women in Bangla language that I have not been able to access on the internet. The second limitation is that of a lack of engagement with Black feminist and queer theory. While I have engaged with theories from several geo-political locations, as it will be evident throughout this thesis, I did not engage with scholarship on sexuality and gender in the context of Africa and the African diaspora. Sultana Alam and Nilufar Matin indicated, in their 1984 article, that Bangladeshi feminist scholarship could benefit from engaging with the reasoning and experiences of feminists in Africa, particularly in conversations around decolonising research and writing about women in the 'Third World' (p. 2).

Ironically, exactly 40 years later, I have fallen short in that area too. Why this disconnect exists, I cannot say. But I wish to invest my attention towards this issue in the future.

Given that most of my methodological choices have been influenced by my participants, I must, without further ado, introduce them.

Introducing Participants

Nusrat

Nusrat was my first interviewee. Nusrat is also a friend. She and I met each other when we attended a language course. When I approached her about my research years later, she agreed to sit for an interview. Nusrat is 29 years old. She is from Khulna, a city around two hundred kilometres far from Dhaka. Currently she resides in Dhaka, partly because her job took her there, and partly because she wanted to have some distance from home and live on her own. While Nusrat told me that she is 'not completely straight' and 'maybe bi', the term 'bisexual' is not something that she is completely comfortable with. Her understanding of her sexual identity is largely shaped by one particular relationship which turned out to be emotionally abusive. When I asked her about why she agreed to be interviewed, she said, 'I feel like I have some personal agenda', hinting at that relationship. 'One of my friends told me that a part of me tries to avoid it, because I am still trying to find my way out of that "cave", so to speak', she added, 'I think agreeing to this is part of my attempt to get out of that'. We will know more about Nusrat in Chapters 2 and 3.

Maha

I have already mentioned Maha, and the common ground between us. 27 years of age and born and based in Dhaka, Maha studied humanities in a public university and is now teaching at a private university. She read about my research on the Instagram story of an acquaintance and emailed me. As soon as we started talking, Maha exclaimed that she was very excited to talk to me about her sexuality. 'I never really get a chance to discuss something so personal with someone else in detail', she said. She also said that she never

found any 'intelligent conversation' surrounding sexual identities and desires, and she wanted to be able to say 'what it's like'. Maha is bisexual. We will know more about what it is like for her in Chapters 2 and 3.

K

K was born in Dhaka and is based in Canada, where they migrated to when they were 10. Now K is 32. They saw my flyer on a queer South Asian Facebook page and emailed me. They identify as trans and non-binary in terms of their gender identity, and queer in terms of their sexual orientation. There are two reasons that made K interested in participating in the study. Firstly, they were already working on being comfortable with their identities, personally, and thought the interview would assist with that. 'When it comes to my identities, I've been ashamed of them in a way that had a lot to do with internalised phobias, like homophobia and transphobia', said K. And then they mentioned the second reason, which is identifying with the remaining categories: Bangladeshi and woman. 'When I saw your posting, I thought, okay, people usually do South Asia rather than Bangladesh, which is what really caught my attention'. K had already participated in another study, but that was centred around South Asian queer identities, so seeing Bangladesh, specifically, intrigued them. 'And I was raised, and still am expected to be, a cis woman. I thought, okay, there are things that might be relevant here'. The most striking thing about K is the thing that, unfortunately, cannot be translated into words: it is their laughter. K has the heartiest laughter imaginable – it comes from deep within, and it is infectious. We will get to know K more closely in Chapters 2 and 4.

Taposhi

Taposhi is the Executive Director of a Bangladeshi queer organisation named Shweekriti (also a pseudonym, chosen by Taposhi herself – 'We have pseudonyms for everything', she told me). She is 32, from and based in Dhaka. While most of my participants contacted me for the interviews, I sought Taposhi out myself. I got in touch with a UK-based queer community which later connected me with Taposhi. Her interview is thematically different from the rest, because she speaks mostly about her experiences with activism,

and rarely about her experiences of being a lesbian. I must make a note here that Taposhi is incredibly funny – we will find that out soon enough in Chapter 2.

Zainab

Zainab, now 31 years old, was born in a coastal city in Bangladesh and remained there until she finished her undergraduate degree studying social sciences at a public university. Then, she briefly stayed in Dhaka for a job. From Dhaka, she went to one of the Gulf countries, and afterwards, she went to Central Europe. The trajectory of Zainab's movement was not mere coincidence. She was moving, time and again, to be together with her partner. Zainab identifies as a queer person. She said that she now has the word and the knowledge of what queer means, but it is still a fairly new word to her. Recently, she has been thinking about her pronouns too, but she is yet to take a definitive decision. For the time being, she is okay with she/her. Zainab came across my flyer on Instagram and thought it would be interesting to participate, particularly since it was focused on Bangladeshis and she thought she could contribute somehow. The other reason was more personal – a hope that it would push her to open up. 'I have so much shield around me… mentally', she said, 'I have been guarding my own identity and my life for so long. Talking to a person whom I don't know but who is also from Bangladesh… That's why I thought I'm going to participate'. We will follow Zainab and her movements in Chapters 2 and 4.

Roshni

Roshni was born in Dhaka and was a child when her family migrated to the US. Now 26 years old, she found out about my research on Instagram and reached out. 'It was really exciting for me', she said, 'because for a really long time I thought I was the only queer Bangladeshi person, like, ever! I know that's not true, like, in theory there are other people. But I never really met them.' Roshni identifies as queer. If there is one thing Roshni and I have in common, it is that we both like Kristen Stewart. We will learn more about Roshni in Chapters 2 and 4.

Sraboni

Sraboni is the only one among my participants who consented to using her own name and other identifying details for my interview. 'Everyone knows', she said. Everyone except her parents and elders, that is. Of course, I took caution, and changed information here and there, including her name, allowing myself to be paranoid just in case. Sraboni is 28 years old. She was born in Barisal city and later moved to Dhaka. She is not *from* Barisal, however. Her parents were from a nearby town. 'I was born in Barisal', she told me, smiling. 'They didn't have good hospitals in our town at that time, so I was born there, it was close'. Sraboni moved to Dhaka when she was in school and have been living there sporadically throughout college and university. After finishing her undergraduate and postgraduate studying gender at a public university, she is now studying photography and slowly adopting it as her profession. In fact, she was searching for queer participants herself for a photography project when she saw my flyer on Facebook. Sraboni identifies as and prefers the word homosexual, although she will accept the word lesbian too. Sraboni will feature in Chapters 2 and 3.

Yasmin

Yasmin was an acquaintance of mine. I requested her to share my research on her Instagram so that I could find more participants. She not only shared my flyer but also expressed interest in being interviewed herself. She said, 'The only reason I'm able to do this is because I've seen you around in Dhaka and I know you a little bit. So, I thought, let's do this, it's gonna be okay'. Yasmin is 25 years old. She is from Dhaka, and is currently based in Central Europe studying social sciences. Yasmin identifies as queer. She has been thinking about identifying as non-binary for a while, but is yet undecided about how to approach it. For the time being, she is staying with she/her pronouns. While none of my participants minded the pseudonyms I assigned to them, Yasmin made sure to inform me that she liked hers and thought it was cute. We will meet Yasmin again Chapters 2 and 4.

CHAPTER 2

QUEER DISCLOSURES *OR* THE ART OF UNVEILING AND READING BETWEEN THE LINES

> *I accept the expression "coming out of the closet". People keep all sorts of things in closets: shoes, skeletons, Narnia—so why not homosexuals? What interests me is that there is no expression yet designed to describe the reverse: the process by which one is come out to. In my experience, when you come out to someone, you can expect one of six possible reactions. This idea is not too far removed from the Kübler-Ross model of the five stages of grief. Her model even shares two terms with mine. So either Kübler-Ross was a big lesbian, or I'm onto something here.*
>
> – Tim McGuire, "So Let Me Get This Straight" (2010)

While Tim McGuire thinks of shoes, skeletons, and Narnia when it comes to the expression 'coming out of the closet', I always think of secrets. It probably explains why I am in favour of naming this chapter 'queer disclosures' – partly because it is about disclosures from queer women, but also because the nature of disclosure itself seems queer to me. There is an air of the uncanny attached to it. A secret is going to be revealed, and what follows will be the unveiling of a mystery. Once a mystery rises to surface, naturally, things do not remain the same. As I will soon reveal through the stories shared by my participants, their experiences with disclosures and the chain of events that follow are all unique in their own rights, and they all add something to the popular imaginary of 'coming out' – either by aligning with it, or by deviating from it, and certainly by complicating it.

In this chapter I will present narratives of disclosures and how such disclosures unfolded in the lives of my participants. The aim of this chapter is to explore the friction that exists between dominant discourses and lived experiences regarding disclosures. I wish to establish, firstly, the significance of context – especially social and cultural context, but also specific personal contexts – in understanding narratives of queer disclosures. Secondly, I wish to argue, and will illustrate with reference to the experiences of my

participants, that established global identity categories and representations of queerness often fall short in communicating the experiences of queer Bangladeshi women.

I will divide this chapter in three parts, each of which will highlight three significant factors that influence my participants' thoughts and decisions regarding 'coming out': kinship, community, and representation. I will focus on these three themes not only because they emerged in conversation as elements that affect my participants' understanding of their queer identities but also because they appeared to determine their senses of belongingness and their capacity to envision queer futures. In the first part, I will explore what 'coming out' means to my participants, and more importantly, what 'coming out' does. I will build on scholars such as Eve Sedgwick (2008) and Carlos Ulises Decena (2008), who propose concepts such as performative silence and tacit subjects, in an understanding of disclosures. Prior to discussing disclosures, particularly within kinship contexts, I will consider the limitations of language in articulating sexual identities, and the significance of the in-between space that bisexuality occupies. In the second part, I will consider the role of queer activism and queer communities in the lives of my participants to connect their personal experiences to a broader context. In the final section, I will address popular culture vis-à-vis my participants' experiences. The intention here is not to textually analyse the texts they mention but to consider what resonates with them, and more importantly, what is missing. A second aim is to engage more deeply with a chosen array of texts – not so much to provide an overview of queer popular culture but to explore representations in popular culture as a point of reference to communicate the life stories and lived experiences of my queer participants, particularly around disclosures.

Part 1: Articulations and Disclosures

What's in a Word: On Articulating Queerness

Allow me to present an imaginary roundtable. My participants have not met each other, and I have never sat with all of them together. However, I did ask all of them the following question: What is the sexual identifying category that resonates with you the most? Each came up with terms that they preferred, found relatable, or felt comfortable with. Before attempting to unpack the closet, allow me to unpack the way my participants articulate their identities, and explore how they understand, adopt, or steer away from free-floating global identity categories that connote queerness.

Nusrat

> I knew I wasn't completely straight. I thought maybe I was bi. I liked men before that incident (her only relationship with a woman which was emotionally abusive), and I liked them after. It was not like I was *turning homo* completely (said jokingly). I think this relationship made me see relationships like this from a negative perspective, which is why I never felt that kind of attraction to any other woman, nor did I want to try anything out. So, at this point, I'm not entirely sure if it was just me being attracted to that one woman, or women in general. I guess I was confused then, and I am confused now. The only difference now is that I don't really care about it anymore.

Maha

> It's like, I have the option as a bisexual to pretend that I'm not. I have the option to pick either. So, I can pick the less controversial option at the end. It's just sad that I never really got to pursue any homosexual relationships in my adult life. I also really don't see that many women around who are out as bisexuals or lesbians. I can't really align my experience with anybody.

K

> I think trans is an umbrella term to me. Under the umbrella there are gender conforming trans people, gender non-conforming trans people, and agender people. It's anything that isn't to do with the thing that you're assigned at birth.

This is what I see it as. But, there's a lot of discourse within the trans community that that is not what it is, and I fully respect that. To me, though, I do feel like I'm under the trans category, because I'm not part of what was assigned to me at birth. I'm creating my own – whatever genderfluidity and non-conformingness looks like – because it's not the same for everyone. That's why I'm kind of interchanging those words (K also uses non-binary and genderfluid to identify themselves). And queer is more about my sexuality rather than my gender. I saw somewhere that queer can be anything outside of the heteronormative. So, I feel like that more defines how I identify.

Zainab

I mean, I am a queer person. Now I have the word and the knowledge of what queer means. But even this word is very new to me. I think I've been familiar with it for a couple of years now, two years maybe. I feel like, I am who I am, it's so natural to me, I don't bother about the terms, I don't need to know the terms. Yes, I learn when I hear. When I know what it means and understand the context, some things are quite relatable. Otherwise, I don't find it too relatable. Recently I have been thinking about my pronouns. But I'm not sure, I still need to think more about it. I mean, I'm not sure if it's really necessary, if I'm okay with being she/her, and if not then why not. At the moment, I'm okay with it. I didn't know about non-binary and they/them before. I think it's a good term, and I relate to it, but I'm not sure if I really want to take it yet. I don't know how to use it (laughs).

Roshni

I do prefer queer. I think there was a lot of confusion when I was first thinking about both gender and sexual orientation. I think the word queer allows a lot of fluidity and doesn't necessarily require me to specifically identify myself. So, it can change what it means without having to change the word.

Sraboni

I prefer homosexual. I am female, and I feel like a female, I identify with that. Just my orientation is different. I'm fine with lesbian too. I think I knew naturally (about her sexual orientation). It wasn't like I realised it one fine morning (laughs). I was

used to it since I was young. Maybe I did look these things up once I got a bit older. I was more concerned with understanding if I was bisexual. But I wasn't. This is just what I felt since I was young, it was very natural to me. I learned the term later, I probably heard it from someone.

Yasmin

Label-wise, for the time being, I prefer queer. That's it, end of conversation. I don't like constantly explaining myself and describing myself. It's tiring. And nobody ever asks you these questions if you're straight. But if you say anything beyond that, everyone goes, oh, what do you mean? It's like, so you've said this one sentence, and this is how you have to perform it and live it. And if you don't do that, you're not being honest or something.

(My participant Taposhi is absent from this roundtable because she spoke more about her activism and less about her personal experiences. She self-identified as a lesbian, and we did not discuss the matter any further.)

Each word chosen by my participants contain an array of feelings and emotions associated with them. For Nusrat, there is ambiguity in being 'maybe bi'. The distance between straightness and queerness presents itself as a progression, a turning. Nusrat resides in the in-betweenness of being bisexual – away from of being 'completely straight', yet away from '*turning homo'* completely. Turnings are important, as Sara Ahmed (2006) reminds us – life is full of turning points, and different directions emerge depending on which way one turns. Nusrat refuses to turn; she remains in the in-between. However, there is also ambivalence there, particularly because of the emotional abuse that tainted her only relationship with a woman and gave her a 'negative perspective'. She understands the difference between '*this* relationship' and 'relationships *like this'*, but the ambivalence remains. There is also uncertainty in her mind about bisexuality as an experience (i.e. being attracted to that one woman) and bisexuality as an orientation or identity (i.e. being attracted to women in general). She gets used to this uncertainty with the passing of time ('I don't really care about it anymore'), but it does not go away.

Maha appears to be certain of her bisexuality. However, for her too, there is difference between identity and experience. She maintains that bisexuality is a choice, an option – one can take their pick, one can choose the 'less controversial' option, eventually. There is also room for pretence, for passing as heterosexual. However, there is sadness, as there is disjunction between *being* and *doing*. Maha's confidence about *being* bisexual does not ensure her many opportunities for *doing* bisexuality (i.e. pursuing homosexual relationships in her adult life). The inability to align her experience with others only makes matters worse. I return to Ahmed (2006) here once again. Maha, in a way, also stands at a turning point. What keeps her from taking a direction is the lack of witnessing others having taken that same direction before her. I will discuss more of Maha's thoughts on her life trajectory in Chapter 3.

Zainab and Sraboni's identities emphasise the distinction between knowledge acquired and knowledge learned. Being a queer person is natural to Zainab, attaching labels to it is irrelevant. Which is not to say that the labels are irrelevant in and of themselves – they can be quite relatable once their meanings and contexts are understood. However, devoid of that additional information, the words appear unnecessary. While there is excitement in coming across a new term (queer and non-binary, in Zainab's context) their value and function is not necessarily instinctive. One does not automatically know how to use them. Sraboni, too, felt that she was homosexual from a young age and knew it 'naturally' – the words came later. I find it particularly intriguing that Sraboni was more concerned with being certain if she was bisexual. I wonder if she too had hoped, like Maha, to someday choose the less controversial option. There is no way of knowing for sure, since I never asked her this follow-up question. Sraboni has a complicated relationship with bisexuality, and I will come to that later in this chapter.

Even when one knows the right words, the meanings may require customisation. K, for instance, knows the right words – trans, non-binary, genderfluid, queer – but they are also aware that one size does not fit all. Identifying words need to be tailor-made, one needs to create their own. K does it by feel-thinking their way around identifications – they *think* that trans is an umbrella term for them, they *feel* that they are under the trans category, they *feel* queer. However, K thinks that they could never articulate their identity in Bangla. K speaks Bangla beautifully (despite having moved to Canada at the age of 10 – they worry about losing touch with the language, but they have not). But, when I asked K if they could

try to articulate their identity in Bangla, they laughed and said 'Oh my God, umm, if you help me'. K's understanding of queerness thus remains laden with their dissonance with the culture that they were born into and the culture that they adapted to. I will expand further upon this later in this chapter, and in Chapter 4.

Roshni and Yasmin seem to embrace the ambivalence and ambiguity of a fluid queer identity which generates discomfort in Nusrat and Maha. For them, the word queer connotes fluidity. It works for Roshni because it leaves room for her to change, without having to change the word that identifies her. This lack of specificity works for Yasmin too. She prefers queer because it ends the conversation, it keeps her from succumbing to the exhaustion of constantly explaining and describing herself, particularly since the self is susceptible to change. The exhaustion that Yasmin speaks of is noteworthy – to claim to be queer is to bear the expectations of living a queer life and performing queerness, whatever that may entail; to not do that is to 'not be honest or something'.

It may be relevant that Roshni and Yasmin are the youngest among my participants, 26 and 25 respectively. I do not make wide assumptions about young people and their exposure to the internet, but for Yasmin it did play a role in helping her understand herself. During her late-teens, she realised that all her friends were either dating or were interested in people, but always in a heterosexual context. Yasmin never found that kind of interest and wondered why: 'At a point I stopped and thought, you know, what is wrong with me? Why am I like this?' Yasmin began to look for something that would explain herself to herself. 'That's when I came across the world of Google (laughs)'. Many words made sense to her: demisexuality, pansexuality, polyamory. She began her quest on Google to 'figure it out', and realised that deciding on a fixed identity, or a single word, may not suffice: 'There is nothing to fix or to know for sure. It's always changing, and it's always part of a conversation. Also, sexuality doesn't necessarily remain the same all the time for me. It depends on where I am physically and geographically located'. It is not only the space one occupies but also the language one speaks and is exposed to. As Yasmin points out:

> The language itself is different. We don't even talk like that. To be honest, I have limitations too, because I have read all these things in English and Googled these things in English. Even the names of the sexualities are in English. Sure, it's giving

> me a way to think about things. But before the label was there, I was still the way I was. We need to find a different way of talking about these things. I don't know what that different thing is, but there must be something else.

I find Yasmin's use of the word 'limitation' interesting. While the access to knowledge around gender and sexual identities may seem like a blessing – and it certainly can be – the nature of it appearing singular and universal can get in the way of an embodied comfort. The dissonance that Yasmin senses is not too dissimilar from the dissonance Zainab and Sraboni feel. While Yasmin was actively looking, the other two discovered their identities naturally, came across the identifying labels later, and attempted to accommodate them to their needs. In either case, the label did not precede the individual embodying the label. The label is also subject to change based on the space the label-holder occupies, especially in the context of transnational mobility – I will elaborate further on this in Chapter 4.

I believe this is a good place for me to present some definitional justifications as to why I am choosing to use the word 'queer' in describing my participants, particularly when it is evident that they each have their own choice of identifying words. I choose queer because of its capacity of being 'deliberately ambiguous', as Whitney Monaghan puts it, and simultaneously accomplishing various actions, such as 'naming, describing, doing and being' (2016, p. 7). I choose queer also because of the multitude of meanings it contains, connoting, as Eve Sedgwick says, 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically' (1993, p. 8). And finally, I choose queer because of the inherent sense of non-belongingness it carries, as per bell hooks, "Queer' not as being about who you're having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but 'queer' as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live' (2014, 1:27:30). I see a reflection of Monaghan's ambiguity, as well as queer's ability of doing and being, in Nusrat and Maha's experiences. I see Sedgwick's version of queer – and its possibilities, gaps, dissonances and resonances – reflected in the fluidities and curiosities of Roshni and Yasmin. I see hooks' being ill-at-ease and constantly fighting to find a place in Sraboni and Zainab's exchanges with

identifying words, and K's enthusiasm for creating their own meaning in them. These are the reasons why 'queer' seems befitting to me.

All my participants seem to have embraced, in one way or another, global identity categories such as queer, homosexual, lesbian, bisexual, trans, genderfluid, and non-binary. And yet, there is resistance in that embrace. K wonders if they could find a way to talk about their identity in Bangla, Yasmin' proposes to find 'a different way of talking about these things'. I discussed in Chapter 1 that terminological tensions exist between male sexual identity categories (e.g., gay, MSM, *koti*), as indicated by Siddiqi (2011). Karim (2018) points out similar tensions between female identity categories of *shomopremi* and lesbian. In her engagement with two non-heterosexual women's support groups, Karim discovered that her educated urban middle-class participants preferred the term *shomopremi* (*shomo* meaning same and *premi* meaning to love; to love the same). By contrast, her less educated and less socio-economically privileged participants, who are sex workers by profession, preferred the term lesbian. The emphasis on 'love' in *shomopremi*, and therefore a lesser extent of sexual connotation, matched the notion of 'respectable female sexuality' for the first group (p. 200). The second group of women, already marginalised due to their profession, did not feel the need to maintain such notions of respectability. They came across the term lesbian through HIV/AIDS prevention health campaigns and simply adopted it by recognising its universal currency.

However, I must note that none of my participants identified with the term *shomopremi*. I asked my participant Taposhi if she came across any such local identifying terms in Bangla in her capacity as a queer activist. She noted that in her experience with community organising, she noticed an inclination towards the English terms, not Bangla terms. My assumption is that alongside class and education, age and location too play a role in determining linguistic preferences in this regard. My participants are not only educated and middle-class but also young and mobile; their affiliation (albeit contested) with global terms is not unexpected.

Once again, I find similarities between my findings and Shawna Tang's (2017). Tang observed that lesbians in Singapore were accepting of linguistic practices and political strategies of 'the progressive narratives of a universal Western model' (p. 11). Linguistically there are no indigenised terms to refer to lesbians in Singapore, and terms

such as 'lesbian' and 'queer', and even 'butch' or 'femme' – i.e., terms developed from Anglo-American contexts – are widely used (p. 11). Tang's theorisation of the lived experiences and sexual subjectivities of queer Singaporean women, therefore, had to take into account the role globalisation plays in the construction of local lesbian identities.

The difference between Tang's context and mine is that my participants do not – and perhaps cannot – accept the global terms unhesitatingly. Yet, they do not have access to, or feel connected to, any viable local alternatives. Such a situation puts my participants in a uniquely disadvantaged position. Siddiqi contends, in the context of her work on queer terminological tensions, that globalised identity categories can to be too narrow in capturing the messiness of local realities. I agree with that – the friction is apparent. However, the lack of alternatives presents its own friction. Hence, my argument reaches the same destination through a different route: Language itself fails in articulating sexual identities – their emergence and understanding is varied, contextual, and affective. This limitation of language is further intensified by the widely popular and seemingly universal image of globalised terminologies, and the lack of appropriate local counterparts. Which is why, even though the global categories do not precede the individual, the individual feels the pressure to mould themselves to the categories, or, as per Yasmin, perform the categories. The global terminologies manage to do their task – but their effect is contested and inadequate.

Which brings me to my next set of questions: If an articulation of sexuality is difficult in and of itself, how does one, then, disclose it to someone else? And what happens when one does?

Unpacking the Closet

While there exists an array of scholarship on queer Bangladeshi women, as indicated in the previous chapter, I have found ideas around identity and disclosures in scholarship elsewhere. My interest in queer disclosures stems from Eve Sedgwick's (2008) thoughts on the performative nature of silence regarding 'coming out' discourses:

> "Closetedness" itself is a performance initiated by the speech act of silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularly by fits and starts, in

> relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it. The speech acts that coming out, in turn, can comprise are as strangely specific. And they may have nothing to do with the acquisition of new knowledge (p. 3).

She further adds that 'silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet' and it 'depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there as is knowledge' (p. 4). Sedgwick's take on performativity regarding the closet thus binds together the nuances of speech and silence, as well as the plurality of knowledge and ignorance.

It is this nuance and plurality around 'coming out' narratives that frames this chapter. Scholars such as Carlos Ulises Decena (2008) and Brian A. Horton (2017) have extended upon Sedgwick's notion, where the former considers silence as a tacit understanding, and the latter sees it as a conscious strategy. In the rest of this section, I will refer to an array of scholars who address discourses of 'coming out' and tensions that exist regarding them. I will pair their works with the stories shared by my participants and the concepts that emerge from them. Along with Decena and Horton, I will draw on the works of Hongwei Bao (2013), Amy Brainer (2018), Danielle Bobker (2015), Ernesto Vasquez del Aguila (2012), Loretta (formerly Benny) LeMaster (2014), and Jason Ritchie (2010). I will divide these narratives of disclosures in segments: *the tacit*, *the agonistic*, *the continuous*, and *the irrelevant* – for ease of argumentation. I will also discuss the unique position bisexuality holds in the context of disclosures. My aim here is a modest one: I wish to place narratives of queer Bangladeshi women alongside the conversations brought forth by these scholars, and hope to discover in which particular ways the friction between dominant discourses on 'coming out' and lived experiences manifests in their lives.

The Tacit

Nusrat used the word 'exposed' when describing how her sexuality was disclosed to her family. 'When it got exposed at home, I did not want it to happen like that. In fact, I probably did not want it to happen at all', she said. Nusrat's choice of word – exposed – connoted that it was not an intentional action, rather an incidental or accidental one. It was almost as if her sexuality exposed itself. While she recounted the rest of the story, I

was reminded of a quote from Jacques Derrida: '*There is something secret*. But it does not conceal itself' (quoted in Bennett and Royle 2004, p. 244).

Nusrat's understanding of her sexual identity – and the 'exposure' of it – are largely shaped by one particular relationship. During her university days, Nusrat was in a relationship with a woman (let us call her Trisha). The relationship turned out to be an abusive one, and she had stayed in it much longer than she would have preferred to. For further background, Nusrat met Trisha by the end of her second year of undergraduate studies. They were both studying in a residential public university in Dhaka, and grew closer to each other when they stayed together in the same hall (dormitory). This bit of information seems important to me, because I asked Nusrat if she thought she would have had the experience of being in a relationship with a woman had she not lived in the hall. She laughed and nodded no. I will expand upon more of Nusrat's thoughts on mobility in Chapter 3. Gradually, Nusrat and Trisha became good friends, and then more: 'The world was shiny and glittery (laughs). It didn't stay like that for too long.' Nusrat began to notice some patterns by the end of the second-year finals that made her question the nature of their relationship: 'I was like, either there is something wrong with her, or there is something wrong with me'.

Nusrat was thinking of ending things. By the end of her undergraduate studies, she went back home to Khulna during the Eid holidays to stay with her parents. It was an opportunity to rethink the relationship, and strategize a break-up. The day before the end of the vacation, Nusrat and Trisha had a heated argument over the phone: 'She started arguing with me and things got really elevated. I don't know what had happened to her that day, she was screaming at me, and she kept asking me to not hang up the phone. I kept telling her that I couldn't talk then, that I would call her later'.

The phone call put a veil of darkness over a happy day. It was the day before she was leaving for the hall again – the ambiance at home was festive, her mother was cooking special meals. Nusrat was worried that the intensity of the phone conversation could be suspicious to her parents: 'I was on the phone for such a long time. The door was locked, but still, they (her family) could tell something was wrong'. She was not wrong. Eventually, her mother knocked on the door and asked her to hang up the phone because

she wanted to talk to her. After a two or three hour-long conversation, Nusrat hung up the phone, switched it off, and opened the door to her mother:

> My mother spoke to me for a long time. She asked me if I was okay, if anything was wrong with me, if everything was alright on campus. It was almost like emotional blackmail: you're my youngest daughter, you're such a beloved daughter of mine, tell me what's wrong with you. She assumed that it had something to do with a guy. I told her that I didn't want to go back to campus anymore. Then my mother suddenly asked if I had a relationship with Trisha. I didn't say anything to her, and she understood whatever she needed to understand. She was quiet for quite a while. Then she asked me some more questions – I don't remember much from that time, my memory still feels a little clouded. I expected my mother to cry. But she didn't. I mean, she did cry, but to my brother – he told me later about it. I expected some teasing as well. But she didn't tease. I had a feeling that maybe my family would start pressing me to get married now. But that didn't happen. I mean, they did press about it once, but not in an unusual way – I think that would've happened anyway. But I could sense that my mother was worrying if I would ever get married. I could sense that. As far as coming out goes, that's all there was to it. Nothing happened at home after that.

The notion of secrets and disclosures, and subsequently coming out of the closet, underscores reciprocity. Someone shares a piece of information to someone else, and a reaction follows. According to Nusrat, her mother 'didn't really react'. Which, I presume, means that she did none of the things that Nusrat expected her to do: crying, teasing, pressuring her to get married. Nusrat told me that while it was an uncomfortable moment, what followed proved to be comfortable for her. After Nusrat's mother found out, so did her brother, her sister, and a cousin. Phone calls were made to Trisha's home, and the situation gradually de-escalated. 'I think everyone kind of knew what was going on that day', she said. But there were no follow-up questions, no extensive discussions. Evidently, nothing had changed.

Nusrat entered the conversation with an anticipatory feeling of dread, and instead received a tacit understanding. I borrow the phrase 'tacit understanding' from Decena

(2008), who emphasises on the necessity of being able to distinguish between the refusal to discuss an openly lived homosexuality, and silence. In his work, he draws from Spanish grammar the concept of tacit subject or 'sujeto tácito', 'the subject that is not spoken but can be ascertained through the conjugation of the verb used in a sentence' (p. 340). Using this grammatical metaphor, he suggests that there lies a place that is both "in" and "out" of the closet (p. 340). He presents narratives from his informants, Dominican immigrant gay and bisexual men in New York, and illustrates that there remains an understanding between immediate and extended family members in not talking about sexuality – especially homosexuality – and treating it as a private matter while also partaking in a public secret. The tacit subject suggests that the act of coming out may sometimes be redundant. A verbal declaration of coming out may become unnecessary when one's non-heterosexuality is already understood or assumed, and therefore is tacit. And 'what is tacit is neither secret nor silent' (p. 340).

It appears that Nusrat's mother discovered and assumed her relationship and her sexuality based on a non-utterance. And her mother's reaction, according to Nusrat, was a non-reaction. Yet there was a shared understanding and a necessary ambiguity, which, according to Decena, are important in sustaining both the individual and the collective. Decena refers to Michael Taussig (1999) in this context and mentions the role of 'knowing what not to know' or 'active not knowing' in public secrets, where not knowledge but the act of not knowing itself becomes power (p. 340). It also complicates the notion of secrecy itself because it shows that everyone is complicit in a shared secret.

Both Nusrat and her mother's worry about marriage is noteworthy here. Nusrat worried that she would be pressed to get married now – now that everyone knows about her sexuality. And she did. But, 'not in an unusual way'. What I find intriguing is that her mother's desire to see Nusrat getting married is detached from her knowledge of Nusrat's sexuality. Bao (2013), in his exploration of "Chineseness" as a queer diaspora, brings forth his own quite similar experience of coming out to his mother:

> When I came out to my mother on a sudden impulse, I regretted it immediately. Not that there were grave consequences, but I need not have told her. In fact, my parents would rather I had not done so. Telling my mother that I was gay put her in a difficult position: she could not keep silent about who I was and what I was

> doing. She either had to support me or oppose me. Influenced by Cartesian dualism and western gay rights discourse, I was fully convinced that it would be dishonest and insincere not to come out. Since I made my decision to be gay and to 'come out', she would have to be clear about whether or not she was 'homophobic', a term that I learned from the 'self-help' books for gays and lesbians translated from English to Chinese (p. 132).

Bao notes the reaction of his mother: instead of addressing his 'coming out', she talks about his future and expresses concerns about it. What Bao does not understand then, and realises later, is that perhaps the reason his parents would prefer to see him in a heterosexual marriage in the future is not due to heteronormativity or homophobia but out of genuine concern for his happiness. Same-sex relationships are considered fragile, and a marriage connotes stability (p. 132).

Nusrat chose not to disclose her sexuality to her mother to avoid discomfort, and an array of reactions – crying, teasing, and pressuring her to get married – that never occurred. I wonder if Nusrat's mother remained silent strategically, to avoid taking a position about her daughter's sexuality. Or perhaps she remained silent as a show of support – since her first concern, pre and post-disclosure, was not about her daughter's sexuality but about the fact that she had been unhappy.

The amalgamation of the non-utterance and the non-reaction, in this context, ensured that Nusrat had not come out. But Nusrat did not remain in the closet either. Brainer (2018), who investigates the emergence of 'coming out' discourses in Taiwan and how it varies across generations, posits that tacit negotiations are 'qualitatively different' from the closet (p. 929). While the latter can be characterized as oppressive and damaging to queer existence, the former offers a liminal space for queer subjects to occupy family and kinship structures. This qualitative difference that Brainer speaks of, and Nusrat's narrative shows, reflects in a scene from the TV show *PEN15* (2019), which is a cringe comedy about two middle-school students in the US. In episode five of season two, one of the two central characters, Maya Iishii-Peters, discloses something completely different and almost equally as vulnerable to her mother. And her mother tells her, 'You know, privacy is different than secret'. In an intimate moment in the bath, Maya's mother demonstrates a similar kind of tacit understanding.

Figure 2.1 Maya talking to her mother, scene from *PEN15* (2019)

Tacit understanding can operate outside the family as well. According to Sraboni, except for her parents and elders in the extended family, 'everyone knows'. And everyone knows because 'everyone could tell'. When Sraboni disclosed to her older brother that she was homosexual, it was fairly anticlimactic: 'He actually already knew it, he could tell. Most people around me could tell. I had a relationship, people noticed'. When everyone knows, there is nothing to disclose. Sraboni also added that the people to whom she has disclosed her sexual orientation have all been fairly supportive: 'No one thought it was particularly odd, and in most cases they already kind of knew. It wasn't a surprise'.

Sraboni is, however, not quite in favour of the concept of coming out: 'I feel like this whole thing exists because everyone assumes that everyone is heterosexual. Like, straight people don't need to talk about it (laughs). Why is it even important talking about it (laughs)? It's all pretty normal, I shouldn't have to mention it separately. In my case, I never felt like it was important.' But it did become important for her to talk about it at one point, when she experienced heartbreak. When her last relationship ended, she was distressed, and could not bear the burden alone: 'I was in a bad place, and I needed to talk'. So, she started talking to her friends about it, and then, gradually, to acquaintances too. 'I think it's because of the last relationship that people found out', Sraboni told me. 'We were living in the same hall (dormitory) at the university, so people saw us, and they knew. And you know, in universities, word spreads'.

I am unsure if Sraboni's disclosures about her sexuality counts as a coming out, since she was not talking about her sexuality but about her broken heart. 'I only tell someone when it's relevant', she told me. The ending of a relationship proved to be relevant. However, Sraboni also clarified that not talking about her sexuality does not equal to being secretive about her sexuality: 'If I'm not hiding myself, or my relationships… If I'm not introducing my girlfriend as my sister (laughs), there really isn't much to talk about'. Clearly, there are parameters – secrecy, disclosure, and tacit understanding are not one and the same. There is also reciprocity. On the one hand, for people on the receiving end, the information Sraboni provided was not new: 'Most people around me already guessed this about me'. On the other hand, Sraboni could also guess how a person could potentially respond: 'I also have a hunch about the person, how they would react'. The tacit understanding, in Sraboni's context, is thus shared, measured, and reciprocated.

The Agonistic

Maha expected a similar tacit understanding from her friends and acquaintances when she disclosed her sexuality to them. However, the response she received was in the contrary. 'Up until a few months ago, I was telling it quite indiscriminately to all of my friends. But something happened a few months ago, and I realised that that was very dangerous. I've been careful since then'. I asked her what happened. 'Two things', she told me. The first was when she met a man and was interested in him. While they had not known each other for long, Maha assumed that the feeling was mutual. For the sake of transparency, she told him that she was bisexual. He seemed shocked. The relationship, before it even started, disintegrated soon after. The second was in a group chat, with a close friend. The close friend expressed that while she was out with her boyfriend, she saw two girls kissing, and had felt disgusted. This proved to be an awkward and anxiety-inducing moment for Maha, because along with Maha, her ex-girlfriend and current friend (let us call her Sally – we will discuss her again soon) was also in that group chat. 'I started freaking out, because Sally and I once *almost* told her about us, about our past'. The first incident made Maha question her judgement – 'I knew nothing about this person. I had known him for two months at that point, and told him a huge piece of information about me. I really shouldn't have done that'. The second incident, however, was far more

complicated. This was not an intimate information disclosed to a stranger; this was a close friend. 'The thing is', she said, 'even if I trust that this person will be able to take this information, what if they can't?'

I circle back to the initial choice of adjectives – dangerous, careful – that Maha associated with disclosures. It is an unfortunate but a necessary question for her to wonder – *what if* they can't? I asked her how she determines if a person can be deemed safe with this information. Maha has some criteria: 'knowing them for a very long time (although, that has not been effective concerning the close friend), knowing or being able to assume that they are tolerant and have a broad worldview (similar to Sraboni), and finally, knowing that 'even if they don't approve of homosexuality, maybe they approve of *me'*. Her third criterion is an addition to Sraboni's conditions of tacit understanding. Maha points out that she *has* a sexuality, but she is not *just* her sexuality; she expects others to be mindful of that.

However, these criteria are reserved for friends and potential love-interests. Maha would not even consider any such criteria for her family:

> Anika: Does anyone in your family, or extended family know?
>
> Maha: No.
>
> A: Would you ever tell them?
>
> M: No (very resonant).
>
> A: What would happen if you did?
>
> M: Bad things (laughs).
>
> A: Like what? I like the way you said bad things (laughs).
>
> M: (laughs) I don't want to even think about it. I will probably not be welcomed in the family anymore. This is where I'm kind of thankful that I'm bi and not one hundred per cent a lesbian. Because if I was, then I would have to be single all my life. I'll just have to say that I'm not interested in marriage, and I'll have to turn down all the proposals and whatnot.
>
> A: Does it bother you that you can't talk about it with anyone in your family?

M: No. It's better if they don't know. I don't tell them a lot about me, so this is just one part.

I read Maha's fear of 'bad things' alongside Horton's (2017) research that explores the creative potential of strategic silence in queer kinship relations. His ethnographic study of young LGBTQ+ persons in Mumbai, India contends that silence can be a mode of negotiating desires for both respectability and queerness, a manipulation of identity to honour both sexual desires and kinship desires. Horton borrows Bhrigupati Singh's concept of 'agonistic intimacy' to reach his point – a mode of intimacy that is 'conceived not in terms of public–private quandaries', rather, 'as a form of moral relatedness between potentially hostile neighbors' (quoted in Horton 2017, p.1062). While Singh's discussion focuses on how different castes and religious groups in India coexist despite the potential for violence, Horton uses the concept to study queer kinships. He suggests that the nature of intimacy is unpredictable and ambivalent, and in normative institutions like the family, violence and care can often co-exist. One who is queer is often mindful of this contradiction.

It makes sense, then, that Maha remains conscious of the volatile nature of home and family. Families can seem 'odd', Bennett and Royle point out, especially with phrases such as 'part of the family', 'keeping things in the family', and 'runs in the family' (2004, p. 35). The familiar in the family can appear simultaneously unfamiliar, even unsettling. However, the agonistic response that Maha predicts as possible outcomes of a disclosure – not being welcomed in the family anymore, having to denounce all marriage proposals and being single all her life – are all anticipatory. They have not happened yet. In fact, they may not happen at all. But, much like Nusrat, Maha feels anticipatory dread. She finds solace in knowing that her bisexuality (i.e., the less controversial option) allows her to tactfully navigate agonistic intimacy within her family. She knows that 'it's better if they don't know'.

Taposhi's experience with agonistic intimacy, on the other hand, was not anticipatory – it actually happened. While Taposhi was reluctant to share many personal stories with me, she did share the story of her coming out:

I mean, what is coming out? You come out with a certain expectation, right? You see TikTok videos of people coming out and getting accepted, and when *you* don't,

> it creates a very big impact on your mind. I tried to come out to my family, really stupidly too, back when I was sixteen. They took me to a doctor. They didn't know what to do. I felt really bad then, I got angry. But now I understand. I mean, what else could they have done? They had nothing, no materials to guide them. If your child comes out to you, what would you do? They didn't know what to do, so they took me to the doctor, and the doctor gave me lots of medicines. For three months I was basically sleeping. Then I told them that I had become straight, and the medicines stopped. I was a very dedicated student, I needed to study. If I try to come out now, I know the situation would be better, and no one would bother me. Because I contribute a lot, economically. You don't want to acknowledge that – the economic balance within the family, the balance of power. But it is there. Until you know that you are not dependent, not *economically* dependent on your family, you shouldn't come out.

Taposhi points out the disparity between expectation and reality. Like Tim McGuire, she factors in the reaction of the person to whom one has come out. While discussing strategic silence, Horton mentions the centrality of 'visibility via verbal disclosure' of one's sexuality in discourses of queer rights and recognition – 'queers are compelled to be talking subjects, those who are "out and proud"' (2017, p. 1060). Oftentimes, verbal disclosures seep into media publics. Bobker (2015) points out, by analysing an advertisement, a TV show, and a website, that there is difference between '"real" and mediated forms of coming out', and that the role of the media regarding this is not disconnected from the rise of the 'gay and lesbian niche market' (p. 33-35). Sander De Ridder and Frederik Dhaenens (2019) examine how media cultures share and regulate the meanings of coming out videos on YouTube, influencing queer youth culture, and authenticating value in the form of symbolic capital to coming out stories. And now, Taposhi speaks of videos on TikTok, where queer people come out and get accepted. But what if *you* don't?

Taposhi did not. She received a response that was undoubtedly agonistic – doctors and medication that make you sleep. Taposhi told me that coming out had been 'glorified too much' and should not be done so in the context of Bangladesh. The parents do not have

the right resources, neither do the children. At the age of sixteen, Taposhi prioritised – education first, sexuality second – and declared that she had become straight. She was aware of the balance of power between members of the family, she was aware that one's status in the family is not unrelated to how much one contributes economically. Taposhi's suggestion to achieve economic independence prior to coming out is similar to Brainer's findings. One of Brainer's participants, an older gay man, relayed that younger queer people in Taiwan had a trajectory planned for coming out – first get an education, then get a job, then gain financial independence from their parents, and finally disclose their sexuality. The older queer people, on the other hand, had already achieved those things, but refrained from such disclosures – 'You see', he said, 'we never planned to come out' (2018, p. 925).

Roshni associated the notion of coming out with negative consequences as well: 'I was really nervous about how my parents would react. They always envisioned me and my sister's wedding, and our married life, and the kids that we would have. Being who I am would mean that they didn't get their dreams'. Much like Nusrat's mother, Roshni's parents also hope for a happy married life for her. Sara Ahmed (2010) speaks of queer children being unhappiness-causes for their parents. She says that in parental responses to the child coming out, the unhappiness of the parents is not so much about their child being queer as it is about their child being unhappy. Heterosexual happiness is overrepresented in public culture, and it connects heterosexuality with the possibility of happy endings. The queer life, on the other hand, is already constructed as an unhappy life, as 'a life without the "things" that make you happy, or as a life that is depressed as it lacks certain things: "a husband, children"' (p. 93).

Roshni's first concern, therefore, was about being a cause of hurt for her parents. The second, the 'larger consequence', was of being disowned by them: 'I was also thinking, if they found out and they were unhappy with it, would they just completely disown me? And that actually happened to my sister, when she was engaging in a relationship that they did not agree with, and they disowned her for about a year'. Roshni's sister's relationship was a heterosexual one. Perhaps it means that Roshni's parents have particular criteria in mind for the potential partners of their daughters, regardless of their sexual orientations. Or perhaps it means that the consequences could be far more severe for Roshni, for being queer. Regardless, much like Taposhi, Roshni pursued a job in a

financially secure position to be prepared for an impending disownment: 'If anything were to happen where my parents decide, no, we don't want you anymore, I'm still gonna be fine on my own'.

So far, two people in Roshni's family know of her sexuality – her sister, who is an ally; and her father. When I asked Roshni how her father had reacted, she said, 'not in a super negative way'. However, he told her to be secretive about it, and not share this information with her mother or any other extended family members. Furthermore, he spoke of choices and consequences:

> He basically talked to me about how difficult my life would be. And, if I'm choosing to go down this route… He really did frame it like, this is your *choice*, if you're going down this route, you essentially need to be absolutely exceptional, so no one can talk badly about you.

There are two key things to unpack here. Firstly, the encouragement towards secrecy. Roshni's parents – her mother especially – is an active part of the Bangladeshi community in the US. Roshni mentioned that she would be the first one in the community to come out, if she ever decided to do so. 'My mother in particular cares a lot about what people think, and cares a lot about how our family is perceived in the community', she added. 'I was also thinking about the backlash she would receive if they found out that she had a gay daughter'. Perhaps Roshni's father's advocacy for secrecy in this context is to both to secure the emotions of Roshni's mother and shield the family from potential gossip. Aguila (2012) brings forth narratives of Peruvian gay and bisexual immigrant men in New York City who adopt different tactics regarding disclosures. Both his participants and their families demonstrate a performativity around different layers of knowledge: 'knowing', 'not knowing' 'pretending not to know', and 'play by the rules of the game' (p. 207). One participant in particular expressed that 'God forgives the sin but not the scandal' (p. 218). Perhaps it is the playing by the rules of the game that Roshni's father wishes to adopt, and the scandal that he wishes to avoid.

The second thing is the emphasis on choice. Roshni's father framed his daughter's sexuality as a choice. I presume that it is not the sexual orientation itself that he considers a choice but the subsequent life trajectory that it entails. To choose to be queer is to choose

difficulty and unhappiness. To choose to 'go down this route' is to walk a path untrodden. Roshni's father neither fully encourages nor discourages Roshni. Instead, he discusses strategies. To shield oneself from the perceived transgression of queerness is to become 'absolutely exceptional'. To be absolutely exceptional is to be immune to gossip and scandal. Loretta LeMaster (2014) shares a similar experience of coming out to their mother:

> I came out to my mother as a gay man on accident. I was 15 years old and she was driving the car. I was looking out of the window rehearsing a debate with my friends who thought I should tell her. Out of my mouth slipped, "I'm gay." My eyes widened unsure whether I had said that out loud. I refused to turn toward my mother who responded, "What did you say?" She was not angry; she authentically had not heard me. I was red, sweaty. I took a deep breath and followed through, "Mom, I think I'm gay." She smiled and asked whether I was sure. I said, "yes". She said, "okay" and kept driving. A few moments later she added, "Just do well in school." (p. 55)

It is of relevance to this anecdote that LeMaster's mother is Taiwanese, and their father is White American. They express that their White family resists and rejects the juxtaposition of their queer masculinity and their pursuit of higher education, whereas their Asian family embraces it because of the same pursuit. I am inclined to say that Roshni's father encourages her to pursue excellence because to prioritise excellence is to ensure at least a little happiness for Roshni's future. Instead of a display of agonistic intimacy, which Roshni expected, her father offers a reluctant roadmap. As for Roshni's mother, I will come to that in Chapter 4.

The Continuous

For Roshni, the act of coming out is a constant, continuous process: 'I don't know if queer people are ever fully out of the closet'. There will always be yet another person to come out to, after all. Instead of the prolonged formality of coming out, Roshni hopes for casual disclosures: 'I think it's the moment when I do feel comfortable saying like, yeah, I'm queer, whatever, moving on, I'll feel like I'm gonna fully come out'. *Fully* coming out – Roshni's expression compels me to wonder if all disclosures, then, are partial disclosures,

and every coming out an act of keeping the closet door not fully open but slightly ajar. Sedgwick speaks of this too, 'the deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption', where 'even an out gay person deals daily with interlocutors about whom she doesn't know whether they know or not' (2008, p. 68). Judith Butler (2004) makes a similar argument, that being 'out' always depends to some extent on being 'in', gaining meaning within that polarity: 'Hence, being "out" must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as "out"' (p.123). Secrecy and disclosures, therefore, come in perpetual succession. I ask Roshni to elaborate further on her feelings associated with disclosures:

> It feels really scary. I think being where I am, being in a more liberal area, for the most part people are gonna be accepting. But you also never know. I think there's always a part of me that's gonna be extremely scared of people reacting negatively, of people not wanting to associate with me, of being judged, because it wasn't easy to be okay with myself. I know that I shouldn't care about what other people think, but it still does play a pretty big role on my self-esteem and how I view myself. I can only be so resilient. When I come out to someone, I am sharing something so precious with them, and they have so much power to hurt me in that moment.

The words that emerge: scary, resilient, power, hurt. Roshni understands the correlation between power and knowledge. When one comes out, one also invites someone in. There are risks involved in that invitation, a possibility of being hurt. The invitation begets fear, *in that moment*. But what if the moment keeps repeating itself? For Roshni, coming out proves to be a repetitive process laden with a sense of incompleteness. It wears her down ('I can only be so resilient'), it exhausts her.

Zainab's thoughts on the exhaustion of constantly having to come out are not too dissimilar: 'There's a before-process, and an after-process, and a during process of telling'. And even with repetition, the process does not become easier with practice:

> Zainab: It's a very scary process for me. I don't feel comfortable coming out. I'm proud of myself for being who I am, of my relationship, and my life. But I don't see a necessity that I need to come out to anyone. I always wanted a place where I can be who I am. Why do I need to come out?
>
> Anika: Like, comfortably staying in?

> Z: Yeah! Comfortably staying in. Also, no straight person had to come out, why do I need to come out? I feel like every coming out has its own trauma.

The affects that emerge here are not too different – disclosures beget fear and discomfort for Zainab. And it is not only the moment of disclosure but also the before and after – the moment of coming out extends. Zainab echoes Sraboni's rationale earlier: if it is not a requirement for a straight person, it should not be a requirement for a queer person. She clarifies that she is proud of herself, her relationship, and her life. It is the declaration and demonstration of that pride that she condones. Zainab does not seem to believe that 'the place where I can be who I am' is outwards – it is an internal space. Instead of coming out, she hopes for the opposite: 'comfortably staying in'.

The trauma that Zainab associates with disclosures correlates to whom one is telling, and what value their reaction contains. 'For example,' she adds, 'If I'm telling one of my classmates, I don't bother what they think, it won't affect me personally. But telling a family member…' Zainab leaves the sentence unfinished. The degree of trauma varies according to the nature of one's relationship with the person reacting. Family is too personal, the chances of being unhappiness-causes for them are greater and the consequences graver. I will unveil Zainab's story, and the experiences of trauma that she speaks of, in chapter 4. Sara Ahmed (2010) says that the process of coming out and being out is an ongoing site of possibility and struggle. But how can one be sure if the outcome would be one of possibility *or* struggle? And to what extent is it relevant to repeatedly put oneself through such a process?

The Irrelevant

Yasmin points out the relevance, or the contextual lack thereof, of coming out discourses. Her first objection is with the language: 'It already puts a West-centric or Eurocentric ideal on it. Like, I never thought of me hiding inside an *almari* (closet or wardrobe; laughs)'. Ritchie's work (2010) indicates that the metaphor of the closet can be inadequate in a different cultural and political context. Based on ethnographic interviews with queer activists in Israel and Palestine, Ritchie contends that the metaphor of the checkpoint proves to be more effective in capturing the experiences of queer Palestinians. He argues that mainstream Israeli queer activism relies heavily on Western narratives of queerness

and the politics of visibility and recognition. In the process of that, they perpetuate racist discourses about queer Palestinians, and act as gatekeepers at a metaphorical checkpoint where queer Palestinians are inspected and policed based on their being 'excessively Arab or insufficiently "gay"' (p. 561).

Yasmin notes that she came across the phrase 'coming out' in American TV shows. Even though it was portrayed to be a significant moment or milestone in a queer person's life, Yasmin did not find that relatable, and thought it was 'a very particular way of looking at one's queer selves'. Which brings me to her second objection, that of relevance:

> I don't think that I would talk to my mother or my father about this. I wouldn't go to them and be like, listen, let's talk about my sexuality, my identity, and you should accept me for who I am (spoken sarcastically, laughs). This is not even relevant for me. But with my sisters, it's a relevant conversation. I feel like that's true not just for queer identities but for any identity.

Yasmin adds that such an attitude does not mean that she is not close to her parents. Rather, the dynamic of her relationship with her parents, which is different from her relationship with her siblings, renders such a discussion irrelevant. Reciprocity is a factor here as well. Yasmin adds more: 'I mean, I don't know anything about my mother's life. How she grew up, her feelings, the story of her life. I only know snippets'. If Yasmin were to tell her mother her own life story, she would want to know hers too. But that is not the nature of their relationship. Camellia, Rommes & Jansen (2021) conducted an ethnographic study of urban, middle-class youth (15-19 years old) in Dhaka, Bangladesh to explore the role of silence on sexuality in youth-parent relationships. They discovered that while there exists cultural taboo about discussing sexuality with parents, particularly regarding transgressing the boundaries of respect within the relationship, the children did not always see silence as a barrier. Rather, they thought that it was necessary for a 'harmonious relationship' (p. 785). Their participants pointed out that they did not find it necessary for their parents to take the role of a friend, and provide information that can easily be acquired from the internet. Yasmin is slightly older than the target demographic in this study, but her emphasis on relevance is not too far off. Camellia, Rommes & Jansen do not mention any participants who identify as queer. But, if discussing sexuality with

parents itself is thought of as irrelevant, then discussing – and disclosing – queer sexualities could be too.

However, not disclosing has its own complications. For K, the idea of coming out is associated with the feeling of being stuck: 'I was very stuck on coming out. I was stuck on the idea that this isn't real until I come out, this isn't real until I tell my family, this isn't real until whatever'. Similar to Bao and LeMaster, K was under the impression that coming out was a requirement. But it proved to be complicated, primarily because of the language. And not so much because of the words themselves – although, that is a component – but because of the process of articulation: 'I can't imagine talking to any of my family members about being queer and genderfluid and gender-nonconforming. I don't have the language for it, I don't even know how it's gonna go, being in my thirties and saying all these things'. K worried that it would be 'confusing', since they are in a polyamorous marriage with cisgender White man and has another partner. Explaining their sexuality, therefore, will require explaining not just one issue but many issues wrapped up in one. K has already expressed their discontent at being unable to express their sexuality in Bangla. There are no viable alternatives to the words that they already carry as identifiers. This linguistic disconnect becomes broader within the context of them being both queer and Bangladeshi in a Canadian context ('My mom calls me Canadian all the time', she said – more on this in Chapter 4). And then comes the different layers of being queer – layers that connote that being queer is more than merely their gender and sexual identities, it is also what they *practice* in their relationships. If one wants to unpack the closet, to what extent can they unpack? K's frustration at being 'stuck on coming out' alleviated, eventually, after visiting a therapist, who helped them realise that perhaps disclosures are not a requirement at all: 'It isn't the reality of every person, and it falls into this very Western narrative of how your queer story has to be and how you're only valid if you come out'.

However, the idea of disclosures became complicated again when K began identifying as trans. 'I was allowing all these things in my life, like growing my facial hair, and cutting my hair, and binding. Doing all these things that were not "feminine" enough for folks'. What happens when one does not come out and yet is perceived as queer? For K, the closet became transparent. As Ivan Coyote puts it in their performance, 'I never get the chance

to come out of the closet, for some reason. My closet was always made of glass' (2010, 4:03). The complicatedness of disclosures manifested as 'more of a logistics thing':

> I sometimes feel like I'm doing a disservice to my mom, because she is reacting to all these changes of me being more accepting of my fat body, and being more accepting of my facial hair, or cutting my hair a certain way. She thinks she was insulting me the other day when she said that, *oh, ami mone korsi kon byata boshe ase garite, ami bujhi nai je tumi ashchho* (Oh, I thought that some guy was sitting in the car, I didn't realise that it was you). And I was like, oh, you think it's an insult, but I love it. And I wanna be able to tell her that. But I can't.

The incident produced a juxtaposition of praise and insult, of queer self-acceptance and parental contestation: looking like 'some guy' is an achievement for K, a validation of their trans identity; for their mother it is an unfeminine shortcoming. However, it also rendered a conventional coming out scenario simultaneously impossible and redundant, creating a paradox of outness: one cannot come out as queer when they are already perceptibly out; one cannot come out as queer when queerness is not within the perception of the person they are coming out to.

The Curious Case of Bisexuality

I have discussed the ambiguity and ambivalence that Nusrat and Maha feel about their bisexuality. Such a feeling, of course, is embedded within the discourse of bisexuality itself. David M. Halperin (2009) presents thirteen ways of looking at a bisexual, arguing that the reason there has been so much argument over the meaning of bisexuality is because the word signifies different things to different people, and there is no general agreement about the equivalence or symmetry between those definitions. It makes sense, then, that Nusrat would hesitatingly think that she is 'maybe bi', or Maha would have a tendency to choose the less controversial monosexual option of passing as straight.

However, for Maha, the possibility of her getting comfortable with her bisexuality and bringing symmetry between her identity as a bisexual and her desire to practice bisexuality in her relationships faces logistical obstacles. When I asked her what it was like being a bisexual woman in Dhaka, she responded as follows:

Maha: Not much.

Anika: Not much happens?

M: No. I don't even get to date women. I had one friend who was bi and a woman. But then I had a friendship-breakup with her, last year, in a very ugly manner. So, there goes my one friend who's a bit similar. It's just that… there is a part of me that doesn't get to come out and play that much. I just don't get to express it. I get to tell my friends that this is a thing, but then, I don't get to apply it.

I asked Maha to elaborate on her experience with dating as a bisexual woman, and she responded with 'I'm not dating', followed by 'dating women is very difficult'. She expressed her frustrations about dating via the app Tinder, which she tried in 2019. 'Big, big regrets', she said, 'it's filled with predatory men'. Maha picked the option of 'interested in both men and women', and ironically, Tinder matched her with her only other bisexual friend, the one she had a 'friendship-breakup' with. Maha then deleted the app.

Maha's frustrations about her inability to date women is not related to her inability to talk about her bisexuality. In fact, her frustrations are intensified by the fact that she has disclosed her bisexuality to her friends, but now she does not 'get to apply it'. A disclosure of her sexuality has made no improvements in the broader structures that would enable her to explore her sexuality. Clare Hemmings (2002) notes how bisexuality is often described as a middle ground between sexualities, rather than being a sexuality in itself: 'a bridge linking polar and otherwise estranged opposites' (p. 3). While it sounds positive, the metaphor reinforces the understanding that bisexuality is only meaningful in either heterosexual or homosexual contexts; it has no enduring context of its own. The bridge reproduces the perception that bisexuality is an abstraction, or a passing phase, since 'no one stays on a bridge for long' (p. 3). Which is why Hemmings endorses the metaphor of the *fence* for bisexuality, as opposed to the more familiar *closet*, referring to Maria Pramaggiore. Pramaggiore (1999), inspired by Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), proposes an 'epistemology of the fence' (p. 144). She notes that closets are not definitive, since they continuously dissolve and reproduce themselves. Closets are also not comprehensive, since they fall short in defining all sexualities. Hence, the fence: 'a place of in-betweenness and indecision', 'a permeable and permeating structure' speaking to the 'mutually inclusive "both/and" rather than the exclusive "either/or", and 'opening

up spaces through which to view, through which to pass, and through which to encounter and enact fluid desires' (pp. 146-147). Maha sits on the fence. However, Maha's fence-sitting becomes less of a choice and more of a last resort adopted due to the lack of choices. Maha's fence-sitting consists of waiting, and eventually getting down and choosing one side – the safe side.

For Sraboni, on the other hand, the fence-sitting of her ex-girlfriends always caused complications. 'Everyone that I had a relationship with were bi', she said. Sraboni had three relationships with women, and the first two women clarified from the very beginning that no one should know about their sexual orientation. 'The second one told me right after the day that we got into a relationship that she will have to marry a man, and she won't be with me for long', she added. Being in a relationship that establishes conditions of the inevitable ending from the start proved to be difficult for Sraboni: 'There was always this responsibility on me, like, when will I leave them? When will I let them go (laughs)? This is why those relationships never worked out'.

Sraboni's own sexual orientation is not a secret. But the condition of secrecy imposed upon her relationships caused her immense stress: 'The thing that used to stress me out is when I was in relationships, and I would have to introduce them as my friends. Especially during my second relationship, she put a lot of pressure on me for keeping it a secret and make sure that no one finds out. Like, why? Why do I have to hide away like a thief?' I cannot oversimplify Sraboni's comments and say that she is displaying signs of biphobia, the same way that I cannot oversimplify and say that her ex-girlfriends were choosing to be unfair. All I could say is that there is a larger structure that imposes certain expectations on women and their life trajectories (e.g., marriage, husband, children). And when these expectations become oppressive, they merely deflect that oppression towards each other. In either case, disclosures in and of themselves do not make any improvements in the choices available to them; they do not bring about any noteworthy change. I will discuss expectations, aspirations, and life trajectories at length in Chapter 3.

A number of things can happen after one discloses one's sexual identity. I have discovered four different outcomes based on my participants' experiences: tacit understandings, agonistic reactions, continuous disclosures, and irrelevant discussions. My perception is that the aftermath of disclosures can be multiple and arbitrary. One can find acceptance

where one expects resistance (like Nusrat, with her mother), one can face unexpected judgement in a presumed safe space (like Maha, with her friend). One can also find a middle-ground (like Roshni, with her father). Sometimes it becomes apparent that the secret was never a secret to begin with (as Sraboni discovered), and sometimes it becomes certain that both secrets and disclosures are not as simple and straight-forward as one thought (as K realised). Disclosures often present themselves as tiringly performative (much to Zainab's dismay). Oftentimes one forms expectations around disclosures based on representations in popular culture (such as the American TV shows that Yasmin speaks of, and the TikTok videos that Taposhi refers to), but the reality contradicts such expectations. Disclosures can also become particularly puzzling in the context of bisexuality, particularly when one realises that there are structural inequalities in place that create a disconnect between identity and practice, between *being* and *doing*.

My intention here is not to produce a compare and contrast between the experiences of queer Bangladeshi women vis-à-vis the narratives found in dominant Western discourses. Brainer cautions us of such a tendency: 'The overemphasis on sexual identity and disclosure is accomplished, in a large part, by the reproduction of Anglo-centric frames that take these concepts for granted, and then test whether they exist in similar or different forms elsewhere' (2018, p. 929). Instead of accuracy, then, I focus on relatability and relevance. To what extent are the broader discourses on disclosures relatable and relevant to queer Bangladeshi women? And if they are not, are there any viable alternatives available to them? Furthermore, how does one engage with the idea of disclosures, when the aftermath – not only in the context of kinship but also in terms of wider expectations and aspirations – remains vague? I invoke Judith Butler's (2004) questioning here:

> [S]o we are out of the closet, but into what? What new unbounded spatiality? The room, the den, the attic, the basement, the house, the bar, the university, some new enclosure whose door, like Kafka's door, produces the expectation of a fresh air and a light of illumination that never arrives? Curiously, it is the figure of the closet that produces this expectation, and which guarantees its dissatisfaction. (pp. 122–123)

Taking Butler's inquiry as a point of departure, I would like to invest the next part of this chapter in exploring what lies outside the proverbial closet, and what role queer communities play in ensuring a sense of belonging for queer Bangladeshi women.

Part 2: Communities and Activism

In this second part, I will consider the role of queer activism and queer communities in the lives of my participants to connect their personal experiences to a broader context, particularly regarding their senses of belonging as queer women within and beyond Bangladesh. My aim is simple: to juxtapose two different conversations around queer communities and activism. I will first discuss my participants' thoughts regarding queer communities and their idea of seeing them as spaces of belongingness or non-belongingness. Then I will discuss the involvement of Taposhi, a queer activist, in the field of community activism, to illuminate on the particular struggles that surface. My curiosity lies in exploring if there are dissonances within the larger structure that may affect one's understanding of sexual disclosures and one's sense of belonging in Bangladeshi queer communities.

On Communities and (Non)Belonging

For some, the idea of belonging to a community is not important. Sraboni, for instance, never felt the urge to reach out to queer communities: 'I never felt that I need to belong in a group. I never felt that kind of belongingness. Being part of a community is not important to me'. While Sraboni's reasoning seems quite straight-forward, Nusrat and Maha's reasonings are slightly more complicated. According to Nusrat: 'I felt like the place that I am in right now… they might not get it.' After asking why she felt that way, she said:

> I don't really know. I thought that there is a chance they would have assumptions about me – like, this is how she is. Even if they don't say anything to me directly, they might impose their thoughts on me indirectly. It could be because I don't feel very strongly about "belonging to" a community. I'm not saying that I never thought about it, but I always felt that Trisha belongs more in a community like that, and I don't, so I won't go there.

Nusrat's identification with her own sexuality is largely influenced by her past relationship, and the unpleasantness attached to it. I am inclined to propose that it also created a rift between her own sexual identity and the idea of queer identities as a whole.

Nusrat's expression hints at a sense of detachment: people who 'belong to' queer communities were 'they'; the others. And such a community was a place for Trisha to belong to, not for her. The complicatedness of her past relationship, paired with her own ambiguity and ambivalence about being bisexual, makes Nusrat self-conscious. *They* might have assumptions, *they* might impose their thoughts. How, then, would Nusrat, the 'maybe bi', could be comfortably queer within a community? For her, to be part of a queer community entails fulfilling the prerequisite of being certain about her queerness; and she is not certain. Even though she was not judged by her family and kin, Nusrat worries about facing judgement from *them*.

Maha's reason for not reaching out to queer communities was due to a feeling of closetedness: 'I guess I'm just so used to being closeted and not acting on the fact that I'm bi that I didn't seek out any platforms either'. The intriguing thing here is that Maha is not closeted. Several people are aware that Maha is bisexual. But she *feels* closeted. Her feeling of being closeted, then, is not necessarily about her inability to talk about her sexuality, rather, it is about her inability to act on it. Her feeling of being closeted, thus, revolves not around disclosures but around action and opportunity.

For Zainab and Yasmin, international students on the move, queer communities proved to be a spatial phenomenon. Zainab moved across spaces for the sake of love and a sense of belongingness: from her birth-town she moved to Dhaka, from there she moved to one of the Gulf countries, and finally she moved to Central Europe (I will discuss the trajectory of Zainab's movements at length in Chapter 4). Moving to Central Europe was important to her and her partner, because the previous locations offered her no sense of community: 'We wanted a community that we could live in. We only had two friends there (in the Gulf) who knew about us. After coming here (to Central Europe) we found a lot of friends. I'm really grateful for them, some of them are our chosen family as well'. For Yasmin, though, the route was reversed; she found a community first in Central Europe, and then in Dhaka. It was easier in Europe: 'I don't even know how. I think there's this vibe or energy or whatever. All these supernatural things happen, and then you're just drawn to particular people (laughs)'. But in Dhaka, it took some time:

> You know, people don't show these sides of themselves in front of the world. They hide these things, and say how it's wrong. They make you feel like you are the odd

> done out, there's no one like you. They isolate you, and then scrub it out of you. Maybe because of that I thought, okay, if there's no one like that, then that's okay. But later on, I figured out that it's not true, there's many people. Now I'm seeing all these late-teen people on social media, and I'm being, like, wow. But the thing is, there were people like these when I was that age too. But because of the thought that I won't tell anyone either… Because people don't talk, it feels like it's not there. But it's there. The minute I accepted it, all these people started to pop up from nowhere. I was like, I'm surrounded by all of you. I just never knew, and they never knew to tell me.

There is a space between tacit understanding and erasure, and it is in this space where, as Sedgwick (2008) says, ignorance can become as potent and plural as knowledge. Stories disappear if one never gets to tell them. The isolation and scrubbing out that Yasmin speaks of points at the disappearance of queer stories, creating a feeling of 'there's no one like you'. Singularity, however, can still be accepted; isolation is harder to cope with. Yasmin feels comforted by the thought of having found the others.

Communities can mean two different things in the context of transnational mobility and being part of the diaspora. Zainab, for instance, found her chosen family in Central Europe. However, it also made her exclude herself from the diaspora Bangladeshi community. 'I don't even post any photos on social media. Not anymore. I basically hide myself from any Bangladeshi community, I don't go (laughs)', she told me. The Instagram account that Zainab uses to communicate with me is a private one, as opposed to her other public account – she only added me after the interview, once she was sure that it was safe. 'I don't add anyone until I know them. This ID is only for those who know me and my partner, who know us', she said. However, this cautiousness and self-exclusion from the Bangladeshi community causes her pain: 'That's the sad part, you know. I feel really left out. But I have to do it. I cannot take the risk that my parents will know. Especially my mom, she's in her seventies now. I don't want to hurt her in any way. So, I try to put on a mask'. Even in a faraway continent, Zainab worries about her mother's feelings being hurt. So, she isolates herself. She puts on a mask and decides that in order to belong to one community, she must keep away from the other.

Roshni, too, keeps her distance from the Bangladeshi community in the US. Since her mother is an active part of that community, Roshni would accompany her to community events regularly when she was young. Once grown up, however, she lost interest: 'I still go to these events sometimes with my mother, just to make her happy. But for the most part, they don't bring me joy, and I get really bored. People are not the most polite, I would say (laughs). I have seen a lot of comments and ideology that I just don't wanna be around'. Roshni already expressed her apprehension about the backlash that her mother might experience within said community had they found out that Roshni was queer. So, while she feels fortunate to be part of a thriving queer community that she discovered during her undergraduate days, she continues to avoid the diaspora Bangladeshi community.

However, there often exists racial discrimination within these queer communities. Roshni emphasises her preference towards communities where the majority are people of colour: 'I think something that's hard about being around White queer people is that they are able to recognise their queerness and how marginality shows up in their lives, but don't think about their queerness in the context of Whiteness as well'. Due to this, Roshni mentions, sometimes racist microaggressions occur (Yasmin spoke of microaggressions too: 'They don't feel micro to me, they feel pretty macro'). Sonali Patel (2019) discusses how the impact of racial discrimination can impact one's involvement in queer communities. Based on qualitative research on the experiences of queer South Asian women in Toronto, Canada, she asserts that such experiences in Western contexts – which do not manifest as racism per se, but can be considered microaggressions when culturally contextualised by people of colour – can produce conflicting demands and expectations of performing queerness. One may feel their cultural identity being erased by their queer identity, and vice versa. So, Roshni feels more at home with queer communities of colour. Not too long before sitting with me for an interview, Roshni found a queer South Asian support group and discussed a particular situation that was causing her to worry: 'What do I do right now because my mom keeps sending out my biodata and it feels really uncomfortable for me? I was about to talk about that in a space where people understood what a biodata meant, understood the process, and what my parents expect of me. That was really nice to have'.

K, however, experiences a sense of non-belongingness within queer spaces too; even the South Asian ones. They used the word 'awful' to describe their experience of going to a

women's coming out group: 'It was kind of clique-y. They all knew each other for a long time, so it was not a fault of their own. But as a new person, I didn't find it very helpful, and I only went once'. In the context of Canada, with different racial dynamics at play, K felt like a fish in a very strange and confusing body of water: 'I went with one of my White queer friends, and everyone started hitting on her. I was like, that's great, but this is supposed to be a support group, and I don't feel very supported (laughs)'. K went through an even worse experience in a queer South Asian space. Hoping that they would feel safer, they went to a queer dance club during a South Asian event. There was dancing, and Bollywood music that they grew up dancing to in dance clubs. But the space mostly consisted of gay South Asian men who did not make K feel safe: 'They were just acting foolish, and groping me. It was not okay. I was like, I don't know any of you, you can't just be touching me without asking me (laughs). It really broke my heart. I never went back to any of the other events'.

K's encounters with queer communities in Canada point towards the intersecting nature of discriminations along the lines of race and gender. They also point towards three other elements regarding queer belonging in a diaspora context: the particular struggles of the immigrant experience, the role of age, and the role of purpose. Queer communities did not work out for K, firstly, because they never had time for it: 'I was working, I was going to university. I was like, I ain't got time for this (laughs)'. But going to queer communities became much harder for K later in life, because they felt it was a 'young space': 'The older people that are there seem like they grew up in that space, and then made it their own as they grew into it'. But K had not grown into it, and found it difficult to penetrate into that sphere. K does not find faults within the groups; they understand that there is a sense of temporal camaraderie there: 'But it's hard for a new person, and a new older person, to just be like hey, I'm here, let's be friends. Let me into the community, knock knock, hello, where is my welcome package? (laughs). My partner and I always joke about my welcome package, and how I've never really gotten it'. K is now in the 'going and trying phase', exploring a South Asian Facebook group – the one where they saw my flyer. K is currently training to become a doula. For K, it is important to have a sense of purpose now, especially in the context of community. Which is why, for their doula work, they want to specifically work with racialised South Asian or other trans, queer, and non-binary people who are going through birth or death. 'I think that's another way for me to be part of the

community', they said, 'It's more like, hey, I have a purpose here, and then I leave, which I'm okay with'. There are larger complexities in K's identity as a queer Bangladeshi in Canada, and Roshni's in the US, which I will address in Chapter 4.

While belonging in queer communities outside Bangladesh has its own particular struggles – navigating the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in particular – it seems almost inaccessible within Bangladesh. The fear of being judged, or the lingering feeling that it will not be a fruitful venture, continues to persist. My Bangladesh-based participants feel inhibitions about belonging in queer communities. My suspicion is that queer communities also find themselves in a place of disconnect when it comes to reaching queer Bangladeshi women, and such a distance is sustained by larger external actors such as the state, non-government organisations, and ally organisations. In the next section I will venture into the arena of queer activism in Bangladesh, particularly in Dhaka.

On Queer Activism and the Disconnect

In this section I will relay the stories shared by my participant Taposhi. Based on her experience with queer activism, she will touch upon particular struggles that have arisen over the years (specifically, since 2012), and highlight issues such as the ambiguity of the state, the ambivalence of NGOs and other ally organisations, the 2016 murders, the law (particularly the role of Section 377 and the Digital Security Act 2018), insufficient women's participation in the field, and an imminent crisis in leadership.

Taposhi began reaching out to queer communities 'just to mingle with people'; the activism came later. She became involved with Boys of Bangladesh (also known as BoB, an organisation predominantly by and for gay men), and Roopbaan (a gender and sexuality-focused magazine turned volunteer-led non-profit platform for LGBT individuals and their allies). Soon after, she started working on an LGB needs assessment survey, a joint venture of BoB and Roopbaan. A turning point for Taposhi's activism begun in 2012-2013, with her involvement in Project Dhee – an initiative by BoB, funded by the American Center (which is the Public Affairs section of the U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh). Project Dhee had two priorities: to develop *Dhee* flashcards as advocacy materials, and to conduct workshops with the flashcards both in and outside of Dhaka. The flashcards were

later published in a graphic comic format in 2015. A launching event was hosted at British Council, and it was covered by numerous major newspapers. 'I think that's when my interest grew. Before this, I thought, yeah, I have a lot of problems in my life, but these are individual problems. I didn't have the maturity yet to think about this in a wider context', Taposhi said. She mentioned that there was a lack of structured organising and active mentorship within the community at the time, which prevented her from thinking about the collective. 'The rage or the questioning was not there – through Project Dhee I started to ask myself questions'. I will discuss *Dhee*, the comic, once again in the next part of this chapter.

Taposhi's experiences with activism can be divided into two timelines: before 2016, and after. While the queer community in Dhaka flourished, and so did Taposhi's volunteer engagement, everything came to a halt in 2016 after the murders of Xulhaz Mannan and K Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy, the co-founder and founding general secretary of Roopbaan respectively. Taposhi recalled the aftermath of the murders:

> It was unthinkable that something like that could happen. There wasn't any fear like that before, that I could die. Some bloggers were also murdered before then, but they were targeting writers and publishers who were promoting atheism. This was different. The trauma of the experience… it was somewhat the same for everyone. No one could be reached, everyone had their Facebook deactivated, no one was picking up their phones. People were fleeing the country and going abroad. Some were still in Bangladesh and didn't know what to do. The activism scene as a whole completely changed.

Within this changed activism scene, around 2017, Taposhi became the new Executive Director of Boys of Bangladesh. Since 2018, the organisation has been known as Shweekriti (pseudonym, chosen by Taposhi). Changing the name was important for two reasons. Firstly, it was important to have partnerships with other organisations, and many were not comfortable with being involved with BoB – it was too well-known as a gay platform, and many were afraid of the consequences of partnering with them. The second reason was far less serious: 'When I became the Executive Director, to have the name of the organisation as Boys of Bangladesh was just extremely weird (laughs)'.

It was not only in name but also in practice that Taposhi wanted to have an increase in women's participation in Shweekriti. 'I had my own visions when I took over', she said. 'I wanted to see more LB women in the scene. The voices of women were missing. We got the voices of *hijras*, transgender women, cis gay men, and even transgender men to a certain extent. But it was very rare and extremely critical to hear from lesbian and bisexual women'. Taposhi pointed at the double-bind of being a queer woman in Bangladesh: 'Being a woman in Bangladesh, and then be lesbian and bisexual, I mean, how hard do you want your life to be (laughs)?' Taposhi feels satisfied that now there is a better percentage of women's participation in her organisation (around forty to forty-five percent). But she remains conscious of the specific obstacles that women feel obligated to accommodate: 'The fear of being exposed is very high. If women do anything even remotely unconventional, they have to listen to a lot of lectures from their families and relatives. Families try to control women rather than men. So, there's a lot of fear that if I get involved in activism, people would find out, my family would know, my colleagues would know. Already my life is so difficult, I don't want to make it worse'.

My hypothesis is that the fear, insecurity, and confusion Bangladeshi women feel about being part of a queer community is in keeping with the systemic discriminations maintained by the state. The role of the government has been equally as ambiguous and ambivalent towards the community. For instance, after taking over Shweekriti, Taposhi registered the organisation as a limited company, and it was posed as a research and consultancy firm. Even the description on Shweekriti's Facebook page uses phrases such as 'inclusivity and diversity about gender and sexuality' and avoids using words like 'queer' or 'LGBT'. 'If our group gets infiltrated and people take screenshots and try to pin it on us, we don't want anything to directly impact us in the long run', Taposhi justified. Since after the 2016 murders, Shweekriti has been taking a 'much softer approach' and prefers advocacy to radical activism: 'I mean, sure, fearing for life is one thing, but I'm more concerned about the message it would send to the community. Last time everything went down completely. We cannot take that risk anymore and have everything go underground again'.

When it comes to the government's tolerance (or the lack thereof) of the queer community, Taposhi's impression is that 'they just don't care':

> They are like, you're here, that's fine. Just don't get out on the streets, don't cause any trouble. They don't care if we exist or don't exist. We're here, they have to tolerate that. If something happens to us, there will be a lot of pressure from foreign countries, and if they support us, there will be pressure from within Bangladesh. So, why bother? They've just… let us be. They don't acknowledge what's happening, and that's their bliss. Like the saying, ignorance is bliss.

But it does not mean that the government stays uninformed of the activities of the community. For example, Taposhi recounts an incident where she received a phone call from the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit which operates under the Dhaka Metropolitan Police. They asked her to meet with them. 'They were trying to show some training or capacity-building examples to some embassies, and say that we work with communities. They called me and one other person', she added. Taposhi did not attend the meeting, but it made her wonder to what extent the government was aware of her whereabouts: 'I don't write anywhere about what I do. I am extremely careful about my data, I never write any of this publicly. Even with that, they already know. They have my information'. So, on the one hand the government refuses to assist the community in a way that would prove to be effective, whereas on the other they present the community's efforts as 'training or capacity-building examples' to foreign embassies.

Taposhi's lack of confidence in the government has further justifications. Regarding the 2016 murders, a verdict was given by the court in 2021, sentencing six members of the militant group Ansar al Islam to death (The Daily Star, 2021). However, Taposhi does not believe that it is any consolation:

> Firstly, we don't support death penalty as activists. Secondly, this verdict does nothing to protect others. When a verdict is declared, other things come to surface as well. For instance, what kind of protection should our community be given? What is the government thinking about that? Will the law give any guidance to the police? Nothing came up.

Taposhi's sentiments are similar to the statement provided by Roopbaan after the declaration of the verdict, where they pointed out that religious extremists are not the only agents of queerphobia in Bangladesh, and the state enables queerphobia through

existing laws and policing practices, one of which is the Digital Security Act (Roopbaan 2021).

Allow me to briefly diverge my attention towards the law. Bangladesh still retains Section 377 of the Penal Code 1860 – a British colonial law that criminalises homosexuality. However, the provision remains as a spectacle and has never been legally enforced (Human Dignity Trust n.d.). Which is not to say that the law has not been used to harass the queer population – the provision itself, however, has never been officially filed in the charge sheets. For example, in 2017, 27 men were arrested on suspicion of being gay in Keraniganj, Dhaka. However, the police decided to charge them for drug offence instead of homosexuality, since they were in possession of illegal drugs and an act of homosexuality had not happened yet (Morgan 2017). On the other hand, under the Digital Security (DSA) Act 2018, which is an iteration of the former Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act 2006, there have been around 754 cases filed only between 1 January 2020, and 31 October 2021 (Riaz, 2021; for further reference, Riaz's article has detailed statistical account of these arrests). Ali Riaz contends that the DSA contains overly broad and vague provisions, which allows the law enforcement agencies to arrest anyone under the mere suspicion that a crime has been committed using social media. Furthermore, since fourteen of the twenty provisions in the law deal with non-bailable offenses, it also allows them to detain an accused indefinitely. As of 2023, the DSA is set to be replaced by the Cyber Security Act (CSA) 2023 with minimal amendments (Dhaka Tribune, 2023).

Which is why, Taposhi tells me, 'Shweekriti does not talk about Section 377 at all – we feel that it would be an effort in vain'. Instead, she indicates that the DSA is a bigger concern: 'It's part of a bigger problem where we can't actually partner up with other organisations, other free-thinkers, journalists, and people from the media, because the problem is the same – there is no freedom of speech'. Taposhi adds that some Bangladeshi queer organisations talk about repealing Section 377. However, none of these organisers live in Bangladesh. 'They live abroad and talk about Section 377, she adds, 'They are also being influenced by India, that India has repealed it. But there are no similarities between us and India other than our shared border'. Ibtisam Ahmed (2019) discusses Section 377 in his essay, where he maintains that the need for active decolonisation is the best way forward for advancing queer rights in Bangladesh, and broadly in South Asia. While I

agree with his critique against neo-colonialism, Taposhi's comment indicates that there are more context-specific complexities at hand.

I should add that among my other Dhaka-dwelling participants (Nusrat, Maha, and Sraboni), no one had any pressing opinions regarding Section 377. When I asked Maha if she worried about the law regarding homosexuality, she replied, 'The law? Is it criminalised to be gay?' Nusrat, on the other hand, said, 'I would definitely want the law to change'. However, she was also aware that the law was not yet in support of queer people, and queer visibility should be navigated with caution: 'We need to be practical, I don't think we can be emotional about it' (she used *we* instead of *they* this time). Nusrat's advocacy in favour of caution is part of a larger sense of hopelessness that I will address in Chapter 3. Sraboni, on the other hand, pointed out that a change in the law will not necessarily lead to a change in people's opinions – her mother's especially. She said, 'I guess that it won't be made legal anytime soon, given the circumstances (like Taposhi said, 'an effort in vain'). And even if it were made legal, if people don't accept it, what's the point? I don't think it would make a lot of difference for me. My mother is very educated, but very conservative. She wouldn't accept it'.

There is also incoherence between the role of the other actors – such as NGOs, feminist organisations, and other ally organisations – that Shweekriti collaborates with. 'It's kind of like power play' with NGOs, Taposhi shares, since they try to have control over project objectives and organisational structures. It is not too different with feminist organisations, either, which are 'not inclusive enough' in Taposhi's experience. However, she has noticed signs of change in the recent days: 'They want to learn, they are acknowledging that this is an issue and we need to talk about it and work on it. Even with NGOs, there are changes taking place. The donors are placing a requirement that people need to prioritise those who they are trying to work for'. Taposhi is not as hopeful about allies, however. 'Ignorant allies' is the phrase she used: 'There are people who have studied gender, and are working in big NGOs, and still they are so confused about things. Like, what does hijra mean, what does intersex mean, how does a woman have sex with another woman, how does a man have sex with another man. So Strange (laughs)! If you want to know, you read!' Taposhi is also critical of the way allyship is perceived: 'People are allies to the point where it doesn't discomfort them, or cause any problems for them. They try to seek out their own benefits in this – that's not good allyship'. However, she is

also aware that support is limited, and options are few: '*nai mamar cheye kana mama bhalo* (proverb; something is better than nothing). They are trying to do at least something. We are in such a backfoot, there is barely any visibility. If we don't partner with others, we will have no visibility at all'.

With a seemingly indifferent government and disjointed partner organisations, Taposhi fears a crisis in leadership. She has found it to be challenging to work with the younger members of the community. While they have the wish to work, they do not have the commitment. 'Urban Gen Z, especially', Taposhi adds (and she clarifies here: 'I'm not roasting them because I'm a millennial'). In Taposhi's experience, the younger members are already sure that they are going to leave the country. Because they feel certain that they are going to leave, they choose not to invest themselves in the community. 'If you're sticking to that', Taposhi says, 'then you don't have any passion to work for the community, you already have the solution'. Taposhi is reluctant to blame them, however. 'Commitment comes with maturity', she says, 'it's not fair of us to expect them to see everything from a wider perspective at such a young age'.

When I met Taposhi for a follow-up interview in Dhaka, she discussed more of her frustrations about the state, her opinions about NGOs and embassies, and her worries about the future of Shweekriti.

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We decide to meet in the tri-state area. The "tri-state" tag is ironic – it is used in reference to three relatively posh areas in Dhaka known as Gulshan, Banani, and Baridhara. Neither of us live there, but Taposhi has an errand to run in the vicinity. She suggests a café, we pick an off-peak hour to meet in an attempt to avoid traffic. I start early, I reach early. The café appears to have French décor, but the menu is a scramble of everything. I order an "Irish cappuccino" (it has no alcohol in it). I go over my notes while I wait. When Taposhi arrives, we decide to move to the outside seating area so that we can smoke a cigarette if we wish to. We order soup – mushroom for Taposhi and roasted pepper for me. Outside is loud because of the traffic, but we start talking.

'When are you leaving?', she asks me. I tell her the date and she says that I will miss the party. 'What party?', I ask her. Her organisation, Shweekriti, is arranging a meet-up of the members, and it is scheduled three days after my date of departure. She wanted to invite me,

but I will be gone by then. I tell her that I am sad about missing out, but she assures me that there will be more parties, and more chances for me to meet everyone. I ask her to tell me more about these parties. There are different kinds. There are some that are arranged at embassies, or clubs associated with embassy employees, diplomats, and expats. All the parties are exclusive, but these are extra exclusive. The embassies provide the space to host meetings, but it must be kept under the radar – 'You can arrange events, but there can be absolutely no publicity'. There is also the matter of privilege – not everyone has access to these spaces, one is expected to belong to a certain social and economic class. Then there are the cultural events: game nights, publication events, etc. Taposhi's organisation arranges some of these exclusively for women. 'Game nights then become game evenings because most of the members cannot stay out late', Taposhi laughs as she tells me. Sometimes such events are arranged outside of Dhaka, but women's participation tends to be much lower. 'It's almost as if there are no women outside Dhaka', Taposhi laughs again. There are also home meet-ups, which are much more casual, much more spontaneous. And finally, there are pop-up events. The locations of these events are guarded vigilantly and shared cautiously for safety measures. 'There is one that begins as a party and ends as nearly an orgy', Taposhi jokes. 'Mostly men used to come to these events, but now many women do too', she adds. 'People often try to find partners in parties such as this, it's a big motivation.'

I ask Taposhi about her thoughts and feelings on activism these days. 'Activism is hard', she says. The queer scene is dispersed, and queer activism has been a slow and underground effort. 'There is doubt within the community itself', she adds. And why wouldn't there be. 'There is no enabling environment', she explains further, 'there are no scopes of holding public discussions or rallies'. Taposhi sounds sullen for a moment. 'It took so long for the hijra and trans scene to come to surface, I don't think the LGB scene will gain momentum anytime soon.' She worries about leadership too. What will become of the organisation after she is no longer able to be in charge? When I first interviewed her, she expressed worries about a potential crisis in leadership. The younger members are keen on leaving the country. Taposhi is reluctant to blame them. Like she said, there is no enabling environment. 'How can I ask them to stay? What assurance can I give them?' Taposhi looks back on her own experience. When she started out as the Executive Director of Shweekriti, there was some hostility against her leadership – a woman's leadership. 'I will tell you stories, but you cannot write about them', she tells me. I assure her that I won't. There is still no one unifying network

for lesbian women in the country, Taposhi reminds me. There is for gay men. She puts emphasis on the fact that queer activism in the country still needs to be more inclusive of queer women. I remind her that she is doing her part to make that happen.

'What about allies?', I ask her. Taposhi says that there are some organisations that are good allies, and are supportive of the cause. There are some "pro-queer" NGOs as well. However, the focus of the NGOs is mostly regarding the hijra and trans demographic. Taposhi has a love-hate relationship with foreign donor agencies. Her critique about foreign donors is very specific: they have funds and they are spending it, but their political motivations are not clear. I ask her about the role of embassies. 'The embassies want to help, but there is no concrete strategy', she tells me. 'They provide space for us, they come to our events if invited, they do "pride month" activities every now and then'. But that is the extent of it. 'People working in the embassies are helpful, but the embassy as a unit is not'.

Our conversation changes direction. We discuss little things. Dating apps, for example. Taposhi mentions that Grindr, Tinder, and Bumble are getting more popular these days. More queer women are using dating apps too, and putting in hard work to find somebody. She also mentions TikTok, and how queer people based in smaller towns outside of Dhaka are using it for self-expression. She thinks that these are all positive changes. She shares more stories with me that I cannot write about. We gossip. We speak freely and openly about the queer scene in Bangladesh. It pleases me because it makes me believe that she trusts me. She tells me stories about her life. 'It's such good data', I think. But I let it go. I gave her my word, after all.

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Part 3: Popular Culture

My interest in queer representations in popular culture stems from two specific purposes that they serve: they assist one in understanding their queer identities, and they expose them to the possibility of imagining queer futures. I recall the work of Whitney Monaghan (2016) in this regard. 'As a teenager', she says, 'everything I knew about being queer was gleaned from a small number of queer films and television series. I watched them in secret and held onto their messages and themes with fervent passion' (p. 1). These films and TV shows shaped the way Monaghan understood her own queerness. However, Monaghan's understanding of queer life from these media was oversimplified, whereas her real life was far more complex. It manifested first when she decided to come out to her mother: 'Film and television had led me to believe that this would be a climactic and defining moment, an affirmation of my identity as a queer person. In reality, it was a bizarre anticlimax that concluded with a confusing statement wherein I semi-renounced everything I had earlier affirmed' (p. 1). In gist, Monaghan disclosed her sexuality to her mother in the postscript of an email that said, 'p.s. I'm a lesbian'. Later on, when she met her mother, she assured her by saying, 'It's probably… you know… just a phase' (p. 1). But it was not just a phase. After much deliberation on why she insisted that her sexuality was a phase, Monaghan realised that the popular culture that she consumed had represented adolescent queer sexuality in a pattern of affirmation and renunciation. While Monaghan knew that her being a lesbian was not a phase, the fleeting representations on film and TV convinced her that it must be so. Similar arguments about the influence of popular culture in queer world-making is also made by Gayatri Gopinath (2005) and Fran Martin (2010). Gopinath considers the context of South Asia and the South Asian diaspora, and suggests that 'the deep investment of dominant diasporic and nationalist ideologies' portrays the queer female subject position as impossible and unimaginable (p. 16). Martin argues that the contemporary Chinese representations of women's same-sex love follows a temporal logic, and signals a similar queer impossibility: 'sexual relations between women are culturally imaginable only in youth; therefore same-sex sexual relations may appear in adult femininity's past, very rarely in its present, and never in its future' (p. 6).

Popular culture holds a significant place in the lives of my participants as well, especially in shaping their self-understanding of queerness and their capacity to imagine queer futures. However, relatable representations are rarely available to them. In the first part of this chapter, I argued that my participants find themselves in a uniquely disadvantaged position regarding queer articulations: on the one hand, they experience a lack of connection to popular global identifying terms; on the other, they find no viable local alternatives. I would like to extend this argument, and propose that my participants find themselves in a similar position regarding representations in popular culture. On the one hand, popular culture in Bangladesh marks an absence of queer representations, particularly queer women's representations. On the other hand, global popular culture, particularly those catering to a West-centric audience, presents a lack of relatability. In the next section, I will bring into view how my participants attempt to navigate this disconnect, and bridge the gap between what resonates and what is missing. I will follow that with an engagement with three popular culture texts from Bangladesh and the Bangladeshi diaspora – the comic *Dhee* (2015), the novel *Bright Lines* (2015), and the documentary *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* (2022) – to further complicate the absence of queer representations in Bangladesh.

What We Talk about When We Talk about Queer Popular Culture

I wish to make two simple points in this section. Firstly, my participants' find themselves in a position of disadvantage regarding relatable representations. Being in such a position affects their self-understanding of queerness, and their capacity to imagine queer futures. Secondly, in the absence of relatable representations, my participants often carry out their own queer readings of popular culture that are not necessarily about queerness at all. I will discuss some of these popular culture texts that have proven to be significant in the lives of my participants. I have added a longer list in Appendix D.

For Maha, popular culture accomplished two things: it helped her understand her own bisexuality, and it validated that it was indeed possible for a woman to fall in love with another woman. While in the ninth grade, she came across TV shows such as *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (2001) and *90210* (2008). 'We used to watch them on Star World', she said. 'My sister told me one day, when I was a school kid, that you know, Ellen is a lesbian,

she has a wife. I was like wow, cool (laughs). In *90210*, there was this character who was straight, but then she dated a girl for a while. She just fell in love with her. I was like, okay, so, that can happen'. The representation on screen helped navigate her own sexuality, and her budding romance with Sally. However, such acceptance did not come as easily to Sally:

> I was exposed to this possibility that two women can fall in love. When things started developing between me and Sally, I took it very easily. But she wasn't even aware that something like that was possible. That women could fall in love with each other. She was very confused by it. I'd tell her that I love her, but then I'd have crushes on male teachers as well. She would be like, why do you like other people, why do you like a guy, what is the deal (laughs)? She just didn't have that exposure, and she was puzzled. When I would say I love you to another friend who was a girl, she would have trouble differentiating. What's the difference with me? Is it the same thing with her, or am I special? So, that was a big thing that tore us apart. She just didn't feel secure enough, no matter how much I told her that I loved her, and that it was a romantic kind of love.

It is intriguing that Sally's confusion was not really about her own sexuality; it was about Maha's. The plurality of Maha's bisexuality made Sally doubt her feelings, because she was not familiar with the fact that such pluralities exist. However, Maha's exposure to queer possibilities did not enable her to envision a queer future – I will discuss this in Chapter 3.

For Nusrat, popular culture was necessary less to understand her sexuality and more to understand the relationship that she was in. Like Monaghan, her real life was complex too, and the only representation that came close to portraying a similar complexity was the power dynamic between the two characters Adèle and Emma in the film *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2014): 'The phases that they had in their relationship, like, why she (Adèle) stayed with her (Emma), and why she left. I can't talk about it clearly, but her confusion – about what she wants to do, where she wants to go – I felt that too. That is how I understood myself as well'.

I asked both Maha and Nusrat if they could recall a Bangladeshi queer representation that they related to. Neither of them did. In fact, my participants were all under the impression that queer representations were largely absent from the public domain in Bangladesh.

This proved to be an especially big obstacle for K while they tried to negotiate their racial, cultural, and sexual identities as an immigrant in Canada. After searching endlessly, they came across the website of Mondro, a volunteer-led non-profit organisation that contains the largest public queer archive in Bangladesh:

> Mondro was really vital when I was first dealing with my internalised queerphobia and transphobia. In the very early stages, I was like, you can't be Bengali and queer, it's too Western. There was also this internal struggle of being too Canadian, whatever that means. But when you are in a White space, you realise, we're not the same. Because I am Brown, and I am an immigrant, and our experiences are not the same. Being queer and being gender non-conforming, it made me think, am I more White? Am I moving away from my Bengali-ness? Mondro was really vital to being, like, no, you are fucking real, you exist, these are your intersectionalities, and you have people that can back you up. You're not White, this is not a White experience.

Roshni expressed a similar sentiment too, about the 'enough-ness' of being in the diaspora: being Bangladeshi enough, or queer enough, or woman enough. K needed some validation to make sense of their enough-ness, and they found it in Mondro. Mondro indicates that queer Bangladeshi content, even if scarce, do exist. But there is a lingering sense of absence that my participants feel. I will further analyse this sense of absence in the next section. As for K's negotiation of complicated intersections, I will address it in Chapter 4.

All my participants have access to cultural content that is produced beyond Bangladesh. However, there is the question of relatability. For instance, according to Taposhi, 'Representations in the West is difficult to relate to, because the societal difference is so big. I don't think I'll ever be able to explain the challenges to them'. She explains further:

> Let me just give you a small example. I live in Dhaka, with my family. Do you think I will live in Dhaka renting a different flat? It's not possible at all! Sure, some people are doing it, but a very small number of people. A woman from a middle-class family, unless she has been married, or has got a job in a different city, or is going abroad to study, cannot live on her own separately from her family. If I can't live

> alone, how can I explore my relationships? These representations can't appear in the West.

Taposhi returns to the double-bind here: being a woman in Bangladesh is difficult, being a queer woman more so. There are some struggles that are particular to queer Bangladeshi women, and representations of such struggles are hard to find elsewhere. Taposhi mentions three options for possible futures here – being married, getting a job in a different city, and going abroad to study. I will illuminate on how my participants relate to these options in Chapter 3.

I would like to point out that access to popular culture is dependent on both spatiality, temporality, and social class. For instance, Maha watched *The Ellen Show* and *90210* in the early 2000s on Star World. I recall watching Star World (also, Star Movies and HBO) during the early 2000s as well. These were pay television channels, however, and one needed to be able to afford them. In a similar timeline, Taposhi followed Bollywood on TV, also on pay television channels. She indicated that even now Bollywood films are more easily accessible because they are available on TV, whereas content on OTT platforms are not accessible to all. Roshni, a US immigrant, watched all her favourite queer representations in shows such as *The Bold Type* (2017) or *Four More Shots Please* (2019) on OTT platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. Neither Netflix nor amazon Prime are accessible in Bangladesh. When there are obstacles in accessing cultural content, one veers towards piracy. 'There are a lot of foreign films too', Taposhi added, that people could only access via piracy:

> Millennials didn't have access to a lot of content, but still, there are some films that almost all lesbians have seen in Bangladesh. *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, for example. *Room in Rom*e is another one. People would download torrents and watch these films. These always have sad endings. Either someone dies, or someone has a breakup. It's like, you watch it and think, well, I'll either die or have a breakup, so I'd better not do anything. (laughs)

Imran Firdaus (2023) discusses the place piracy found in the social and cultural sphere of Bangladesh as early as the 1980s in response to the suppressive censorship laws of the state. Piracy became an act of transgression to overcome the suppressive reality of the local audience. For Taposhi, and for what she dubs 'almost all lesbians in Bangladesh',

downloading torrents to watch *Blue is the Warmest Colour* and *Room in Rome* (2010) appears to be doubly transgressive. Firstly, by bypassing the law, and secondly, by refusing to give in to the erasure that an absence of queer representations imposed upon them.

But even then, one is faced with sad endings – death, or break-ups. Endings are important. Endings are also complicated, particularly in the context of a queer archive. Sara Ahmed (2010) discusses endings in reference to the first American bestselling lesbian pulp novel *Spring Fire* (1952), written by Vin Packer. The novel was published only under the condition that it should not have a happy ending – such an ending would 'make homosexuality attractive' (p. 88). The novel was published, the ending was sad. But Ahmed remarks that ironically, the unhappy ending becomes a political gift. The ending, while a result of censorship, also becomes the means to overcome that censorship. Which is why, Ahmed says, reading unhappy endings in queer archives is a complicated matter, because it is 'a crucial aspect of queer genealogy' (p. 89). However, a repetition of unhappy endings can be discouraging. Which is why, Taposhi sees them and thinks that the only two possible endings for being a lesbian is either death or a break-up – 'so I'd better not do anything'. Which is why, Roshni seeks out happy endings. She likes *The Bold Type* because a queer woman of colour navigates her queerness in a healthy way, she likes *Four More Shots Please* because it is the closest equivalent to 'watching *deshi* women, like, real women, experiencing real things', and be 'determined and passionate and lively' and 'seeing a queer relationship depicted in that too'. 'It made me feel really happy to watch that', she said. She also enjoyed watching the queer holiday romantic-comedy *Happiest Season* (2020; this is when Roshni and I realised that we both like Kristen Stewart, and we both agreed that we like her more now that she is gay).

Futures are often difficult to imagine if representations of the present appear inauthentic. Sraboni, a photographer herself, likes the photography of Nan Goldin: 'I like her work because she basically takes photos of herself, her life. Her own toxic relationship, or her husband beating her and giving her a black eye. It's just herself. I like it because it feels honest'. Sraboni mentions that she is critical of homogenous representations of queer people, especially those that continue to show them as vulnerable: 'If we continue to portray a particular group of people from the perspective of vulnerability or sympathy, it erases the other aspects of their lives. But that person also has other aspects in their life,

obviously'. Sraboni also adds that she is in favour of unbiased queer representations that come from a queer lens: 'Even if it doesn't come from a queer person, as an outsider, how involved are you? That matters.' A similar sentiment was expressed by Maha too, who came across a gay character in the K-drama *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* (2021), and appreciated that it was 'a gay character not in a gay drama but in a normal drama'. The difference, Maha points out, is 'Because we're just here. Like it is in reality. In a gay drama, it will be all about the fact that you're gay. But life isn't about that.' As important as queer representations are, if it appears reductive, one can struggle to relate to it. When I asked Zainab to mention popular culture that she could relate to, she laughed and asked me, 'As a queer individual or as a human being?' A reductive representation can make one forget that both are one.

Sometimes one comes across representations that depict no queerness, but one relates to them as queer individuals. Zainab recalls the Bangladeshi film *Monpura* (2009) as a relatable reference. 'But it's so tragic though!', I tell her. She laughs and says, 'I know'. She adds the Bollywood film *Shiddat* (2021) to the list. Both portray star-crossed lovers, both end in tragedy, and neither have any queer characters in them. 'It's a sad story, the guy dies in the end', Zainab gives me a spoiler about the latter film, 'Thankfully, I'm alive (laughs). But the dangerous path that he was taking to reach the person he loves, I could relate to that'. I have hinted at the numerous transnational paths that Zainab crosses to reunite with her partner, again and again. She watches these films, and smuggles her queer experience into them.

Sedgwick (1993) speaks of such smuggling of queerness in her explanation of queer readings: 'to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled' (p. 3). Yasmin accomplishes a similar task when she recalls *natoks* (Bangladeshi soap operas) that she came across at a young age. While she could not recall any specific names, she remembered moments:

> There were scenes like, there has been a wedding, and the next day everyone is talking about the eroticism of the night. But it's all between women. And there's a kind of tension between them. I always found that very interesting. In these spaces,

> when they're talking. This is where they kind of explored their sexuality. I was like, how are they so chill and discussing these things, and it's on TV!

Necessity compels Zainab and Yasmin to invent. In the absence of relatable queer representations, they queer non-queer representations as they see fit.

Zainab and K both add the dimension of music in their queer reading list. Zainab – this time more as human being and less as a queer individual – expresses her love for music: 'Since I was born in the nineties, I grew up listening to Ayub Bachchu and Miles (a Bangladeshi singer, and a Bangladeshi band). My top three favourite songs would be by them, and I often remember them at random times. I think they were always a place for me to find refuge.' K also finds refuge in music, Baul music (folk music of a spiritual and mystical nature) especially:

> The lyric isn't necessarily about queerness, but it is about home, and it is about being free. It's about the earth, and what rootedness means and what nomadic-ness means, and how people can be homes, and what you find in your body is also what you find in nature. It's also about the instruments that they play. And it's all in Bangla, which is rare to hear here. It's very poetic and very beautiful. I find it very spiritual. Qawwali as well. That's also very spiritual and feels healing.

It seems befitting, and rather poetic, that K, who juggles their multiple identities constantly (Bangladeshi, Canadian, queer, trans, non-binary), finds the meaning of home in music. After struggling with internalised transphobia and the body-image issues that arise from them, they find beauty in the connection between the body and nature. Their queer and spiritual selves both merge in contact with music.

Representations in popular culture proved to be significant for my participants. They helped Maha and K understand their identities and intersections, and helped Nusrat navigate her reality. They aided Roshni in envisioning what a happy queer life could look like; they made Taposhi wonder if a happy queer life was possible at all. Some struggled to relate to the available representations (like Taposhi), some craved authenticity that would reflect the simultaneous banality and messiness of real life (like Sraboni, Maha, and Zainab). In the absence of relatable representations, some smuggled their queerness in whatever was available to them, queering the texts themselves in the process (like Zainab,

Yasmin, and K). In all cases, my participants continued to search for *the right representations*. They all agreed that queer popular culture in Bangladesh is hard to find, if they exist at all. I would like to further complicate and analyse this absence of queer popular culture in the next section.

Juxtapositions: *Dhee, Bright Lines,* and *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*

When I began this project, much like my participants, I was also under the impression that queer representations were largely absent from the public domain in Bangladesh. My searches online did not yield many results. Queer Bangladeshi women in popular culture appeared to be at least hidden, if not invisible. However, at this point my understanding is that this hiddenness (or invisibility) is more complicated than I first assumed. In this section I will briefly discuss three texts – the comic *Dhee* (2015), the novel *Bright Lines* (2015), and the documentary *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* (2022). With the aid of these texts, I wish to make three interrelated points: firstly, there are queer representations in Bangladeshi popular culture, but they are not readily available to the masses; secondly, there are representations of queer Bangladeshi women, particularly in the diaspora, but they are not circulated as queer texts; and finally, there are popular culture that speak to the experiences of queer women, even if they do not represent queerness.

Exhibit A: *Dhee*

'There were four of us', Taposhi told me, 'three cis women, two of them lesbians and one of them bisexual, and one cis gay man'. They were in charge of developing the content of *Dhee* – specifically, creating the character 'Dhee' (a Bangla name, translating to intellect, knowledge, or wisdom), the first lesbian comic character in Bangladesh. 'We wanted to share what it was like being a queer woman in Bangladesh. It was a very personal thing. All of us could relate to how Dhee was feeling – the feeling of being excluded, or the feeling of not knowing herself'. The comic also addressed issues that were affecting the lives of queer women on a larger scale, such as homophobia, the legal aspects of being queer, and heteronormativity. 'We drew the scenes by hand', Taposhi added, 'The feeling of seeing it

come to reality was amazing'. The project began in 2014, and the comic was launched in 2015. A launching event was organised at British Council and was covered by several major newspapers. 'The one's who went to the launch still speak fondly of it', Taposhi said.

Unfortunately, one can hardly find traces of the comic online. Some scattered news pieces, with screenshots of one or two pages of the comic – that is the extent of *Dhee*'s presence on the internet. When I searched for *Dhee* online, in 2020 when I started working on this project, I realised that the comic was nowhere to be found in its entirety. The copy that I have of *Dhee* now was emailed to me by Taposhi. One of the first questions I asked her about *Dhee* was regarding its absence. Project Dhee, firstly, was developed as an advocacy tool. It was part of a two-step plan: to develop flashcards (which later became the comic), and to conduct workshops with the aid of those flashcards. It was not intended to be mass produced. Secondly, the presence that it had in news media had to be minimised after the 2016 murders: 'After 2016 we got into this whole spree of removing contents, removing our names, and anything that can make us identifiable. That's why there are not many resources. We contacted publishers and journalists to remove our names. A lot of things were taken down'. Preserving *Dhee* became more difficult because the copies were physical, not digital. It made them less accessible. While Taposhi hopes to reprint them someday, at the moment *Dhee* lingers as an absent presence.

There are two specific scenes from the comic that I found to be quite relevant to my participants experiences. The first is regarding articulations. Dhee wonders if everyone can be the same in terms of sexual orientation. She sits in front of the computer and searches for the right words to give meaning to her sexuality. On her desk sits a dictionary. Dhee's desire to find the right words is not unlike that of my participants. Dhee's inability to merge identity and articulation is a struggle all of my participants have felt at some point in their lives, as I have discussed in detail earlier in this chapter.

Figure 2.2 Dhee searches for the right words to give meaning to her sexuality

The second scene is the ending. Unsure of what the future looks like, Dhee poses a question to the readers: Which option should I pick? There are four possible outcomes: giving in to social pressure and marrying a man, giving in to despair and committing suicide, going abroad in hopes of a new beginning, and getting involved in queer activism to work for those who are like her.

Figure 2.3 Dhee ruminates on the directions her future could take

The ending is open-ended. We do not know what Dhee chose. I asked Taposhi if she believed that those were the only options available to Dhee. 'There are many options', she said, 'but we chose these four to instigate a discussion'. *Dhee* was used as an advocacy material in workshops, and they wanted everyone to not only engage with the options themselves but also comprehend that the onus should not be only on Dhee to decide. Dhee's choices may be about her individual identity, but that identity exists within a larger structure. The choices point towards that structure – the possibilities that they may have, the limitations that they impose. My participants Nusrat and Maha ruminate often on similar choices – to get married, or to go abroad. I have built Chapter 3 around these themes.

The point I wish to make with *Dhee* is simply that while scarce, there are resources available in Bangladesh, and in Bangla language, for and about queer people. However, they are not available to the masses. Concerns about safety prevents queer organisations from having public discussions about being queer. Mondro, for example, publishes anthologies of stories, poetry, and memoirs collected from the community. However, the books are circulated in secrecy. I have two such collections that I will leave unnamed. The e-books that I received via email upon contacting them came with instructions to not share them with anyone, for security reasons. 'We are not publicly talking about the book. If anyone wants to buy the book, please let me know', the email said. Given that such resources are shared only within the community and not discussed publicly, people (like my participants – especially those like Nusrat or Maha who have apprehensions about joining queer communities) have no option but to assume that they do not exist.

Exhibit B: *Bright Lines*

Bright Lines was yet another book I came across in my search for Bangladeshi queer texts on the internet. Published in 2015, it is a queer coming-of-age novel by the American-Bangladeshi writer Tanwi Nandini Islam (they now go by the name Tanaïs). The novel centers around two teenagers, Ella and Charu. It is a tale of their self-discovery and secrets.

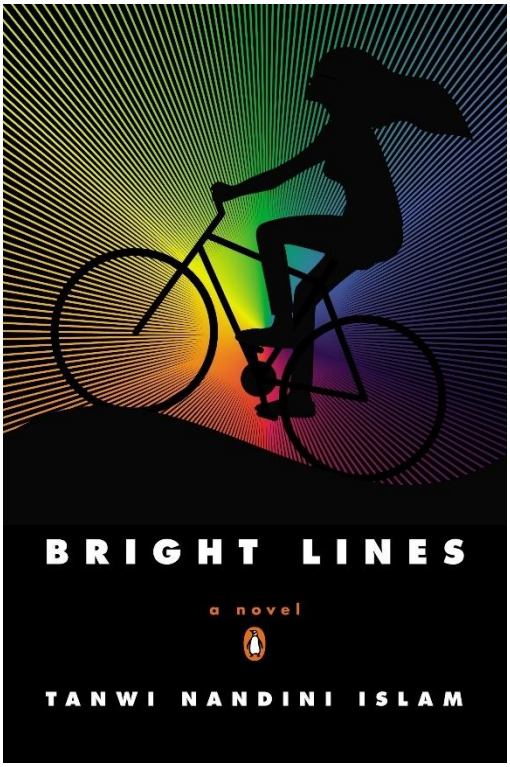

Figure 2.4 Cover of *Bright Lines* (2015)

The protagonist Ella, orphaned as a child, moves from Bangladesh to Brooklyn to live with her uncle, aunt, and cousin Charu. Ella has two secrets: she often has hallucinations at dusk, and she is in love with her cousin:

> During Ella's senior year, two springs ago, while planting rosemary in the herb garden, she realized she was in love with Charu Saleem. From that day, Ella lived in a constant suppression. She'd grinned at Charu in the hallway, and it was easy to avoid her in the twelve-floor behemoth of a school, since she had her schedule memorized. Charu never fathomed Ella's infatuation, and remained free and uncomplicated with her cousin. […] The word *lesbian* felt as foreign to her (Ella) as the word *sister*. There were other kids in school who were more comfortable with being queer, and formed clubs and events that she seemed to get invited to. The idea of belonging to a group because a crush on Charu would "qualify" her as a member – that just wasn't okay. (p. 18)

The novel juggles several themes, including the struggles Ella and Charu face to negotiate their diaspora Bangladeshi Muslim identities in America. There is also the linguistic dilemma, which Ella experiences regarding her queer identity. Charu experiences it too,

concerning all communications with her parents: 'It was impossible to find the words with her parents to communicate her feelings with precision and honesty. She never could express her love or her sorrow in Bangla, the language of her parents. She had English for that' (p. 106). While the first half of the novel explores Ella and Charu's life in Brooklyn, the second half of it takes them back to Bangladesh, where Ella finally finds answers to her questions about belongingness (questions that my participant K often asks too) – regarding her country, her family, and her body.

My reason to use *Bright Lines* as an example is less because of its content and more because of its portrayal at the time in Bangladeshi news media. Firstly, there were not many; I found only two pieces of news in Bangla-language newspapers (one in *Prothom Alo* 2015; one in *Ntv Online* 2015). Secondly, they all portrayed the book as a novel about the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. *Bright Lines* mentions the Liberation War, but only as a background, as a flashback in the lives of Ella and Charu's parents. Did the newspapers intentionally erase the queer theme in the book, or did they tactically conceal it? I cannot say. But *Bright Lines* compels me to hypothesise that there may be more queer representations of Bangladeshi women out there, particularly in the diaspora. But we do not know of them, because they are not circulated as queer texts.

Exhibit C: *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother*

I came across the documentary *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* in 2022, the year it was released. Coincidentally, I watched it at a time when I was reviewing my interviews yet again, trying to understand how to incorporate the things my participants said about their own mothers. In the film, the director Humaira Bilkis turns the camera towards herself. It is her life we see, as she tries to understand her mother Khaleda Bilkis, whose last name she carries. Humaira's mother was a poet. After going to Mecca for pilgrimage, she returns a changed person. She no longer writes poetry, and disapproves of her daughter's filmmaking. Humaira struggles to understand her mother. She relates to the poems her mother had once written, but she fails to connect with the person she has become now. Her mother worries about her constantly – about her reluctance to live a religious life, about her reluctance to get married. When they talk, they argue, and cancel each other out. Humaira's father tries to mediate sometimes, in vain. Nobody wins. 'Mom,

why are you always worried about me?', Humaira asks her mother. Her mother reminds her that she is responsible for her (I am reminded of my own mother here: whenever she would disapprove of something I did, she would not forbid me to do it, rather, she would say, 'not under my roof', because under her roof I am her responsibility).

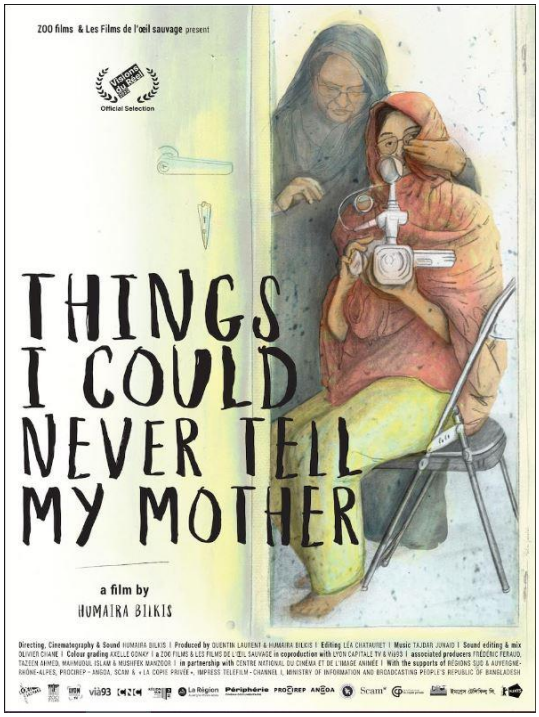

Figure 2.5 Poster of *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* (2022)

As the film progresses, we are taken deeper into the complexity of their kinship. We are introduced to Humaira's boyfriend – a Hindu man from India, an antithesis of the 'good Muslim man' that Humaira's mother wants her to marry. He waits for her to disclose their relationship to her family. She delays the disclosure; he drifts away. 'It is hard for me to judge my mom', she says to him. She remembers her as a source of inspiration, and tries to understand her (and perhaps understand herself in the process). In the meantime, COVID hits Dhaka, and managing life takes precedence over a slowly disintegrating long-distance relationship. Closer to the end of the film, Humaira asks her mother again to explain her preoccupation with her marriage. 'You couldn't choose anyone', she says, 'I wonder how you manage, living alone'.

It is a strange experience to see one's parents change in front of their eyes. My participant Nusrat talks about this: 'I feel that there has been a shift in our mentalities – it doesn't match like it did before. My parents are hooked on their phones all day, listening to *waz* (Islamic religious sermon). This is what happened after the arrival of YouTube and Facebook. (laughs)'. The parents struggle too. Humaira's mother's desire to see her daughter married echoes the worries Nusrat and Roshni's mothers have for their daughters. The pathway to a good future – to renounce marriage is to renounce the possibility of happiness. Perhaps their mothers worry not only because their daughters are their responsibility, but also because they wish to ensure a good life for them. Hence, marriage, since it fits their version of a good life. Traces of *Things I Could Never Tell My Mother* will reappear in Chapter 3, where I will speak more on Sraboni's relationship with her 'very educated, but very conservative' mother. It will reappear in Chapter 4 as well, where I will discuss Zainab's mother, who puts her daughter through religious conversion therapy, but also finances her travel that allows her to reunite with her partner. I will also discuss the strain migration put on the mother-daughter relationship of Roshni and K, where they endlessly complain about each other, but also depend on each other emotionally the most. The documentary does not represent queer women. But the experiences of my queer participants reflect in it, thus queering its reading.

The experiences of my participants', as they navigate queer self-understanding, kinship, and community, reflect friction between expectations and realities. The words that they use to identify themselves do not feel *quite right*. Queer disclosures yield uncertain outcomes; thoughts on queer disclosures contain tensions. Similar uncertainties and tensions encompass queer communities too, both in terms of the personal and the structural. Queer representations fall short in speaking to their lived experiences. The available points of references fail to assist my participants in navigating the contexts that they emerge from and the experiences that they carry as queer Bangladeshi women. The possibility of ever finding the right points of references seem unimaginable. The search continues. Living in such contested present circumstances, how do my participants envision queer futures? In the next chapter, I will attempt to find out.

CHAPTER 3

STRANGER THAN FICTION: IMAGINING QUEER FUTURES

A person who longs to leave the place where he lives is an unhappy person.

— Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984)

Sometimes I think I will never leave Rua dos Douradores.

Once written down, that seems to me like eternity.

— Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (1991)

My intention in this chapter is to discuss the presence of the future. Or, rather, the present circumstances that determine how to envision the future. When I talk about the future, I specifically mean a future for queer Bangladeshi women. In Chapter 1, I discussed how numerous apparent paradoxes exist in the arenas of feminist and queer issues in Bangladesh. I proposed that the friction that they create emerges not because they contradict each other, but because they co-exist. In Chapter 2, I demonstrated how similar frictions exist in the lives of my participants regarding their self-understanding of queerness, their relationship with family and community, and the points of references that they come across in popular culture. In a present layered with such varied complexities, how do my participants envision their future? To investigate how a queer future may be imagined by queer Bangladeshi women, I wish to ask some questions about the present: What does a successful contemporary woman look like in Bangladesh? By extension, what does a successful contemporary *queer* woman look like in Bangladesh? And do these two versions of success intersect? In the following paragraphs, I will engage with the experiences of three of my Dhaka-dwelling participants, Maha, Nusrat, and Sraboni. There are similarities in their stories and there are dissimilarities. But they all converge in illuminating the complexities of being queer Bangladeshi women in the present and imagining queer futures.

My theoretical touchstone for this chapter is to, firstly, examine contemporary national discourses on 'new women' and 'good future' in Bangladesh, in reference to Elora Halim Chowdhury (2018) and Suborna Camellia (2021). I will demonstrate that the contemporary discourses of successful Bangladeshi womanhood do not accommodate queer women, nor do they suggest alternative choices for them to pursue that can be deemed equally as viable and valid. The contemporary good-future fantasies, therefore, do not correspond to the aspirations and expectations that my participants have for their futures. Secondly, I will incorporate Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism and Ghassan Hage's (2009) deliberation on existential immobility to further stretch my argument. Juxtaposing the terrains of South Asian feminist scholarship with feminist studies of emotion and phenomenological anthropology, I will explore how the conflict between the political and the personal versions of ideal presents – and possible futures – affect my participants. I will argue that the optimism portrayed in the image of successful Bangladeshi womanhood – the image that excludes queer women – morphs into cruel optimism for them. This cruel optimism manifests in forms of ordinary everyday crisis, and induces a feeling of stuckedness. Such a feeling of stuckedness compels them to believe that a good queer future is not an option in Bangladesh, and one must seek it someplace else.

Queer Utopia, or Canada

> Maha: The thing is, we see our heterosexual relationships as not as big as *our* relationship. So, it's like, yeah, you're dating a guy, it's not that much of a big deal (laughs).
>
> Anika: Like an endless array of rebounds with guys until you two figure it out?
>
> Maha: Yeah (laughs). What's interesting is, I have had crushes and almost-relationships since then, but I haven't been in a relationship after that. But she has dated guys, she's been in long term relationships. So, whenever I need advice regarding love, I ask her, she gives me good advice. But, you know, I've always had this thing in my mind that if I could go to Canada, then maybe we could try again. I have this retirement plan that if both of our husbands die, then maybe we can live out the rest of our lives together (laughs).

Maha spoke to me of Sally – her schoolmate and best friend, her first queer love. She lives in Canada, Maha told me, it has been more than ten years. Soon after their friendship took a turn towards love, Sally moved to Canada. Their relationship slowly disintegrated over the years. 'I put this whole story in some back alley of my mind', Maha added, 'the fact that I was queer, the fact that I had a lesbian relationship. I was like, yeah… *hoy* (it happens), it's a ten-year old story (laughs)'. I asked Maha about Canada: 'Say you go to Canada, and you guys do get together. Would you pick up your relationship where you left it off?'

Maha began dissecting her version of queer utopia, or Canada: 'This is where the problem is, isn't it?' Coincidentally, and dramatically – much like the entirety of their story – they actually had a conversation about it ten years after Sally had left:

> In our conversation, when were honest with each other, she said that if you told me to come back to Bangladesh, I would, back then. And I'm like, what would the future be of that? In Bangladesh, being in love, being so intentionally in love with someone who is of my gender, my sex… We were together for about eight-nine months, and then she had to move. If we had a relationship of eight-nine years, and then the marriage talks started, what would happen then? So, I saw it from a practical point of view. I said that I wouldn't want you to come back from Canada to Bangladesh. Things, of course, have gotten progressively bad for women here. Especially if you're bi or gay. So, that's that. I wouldn't want her to come back to be in a relationship with me, because… why? (laughs) Why would I do that to you? But then, if I go to Canada, where it's okay… But then again, her parents have expectations, my parents have expectations. I want to get married, I want kids. My kids, not adopted. I mean, adoption is great, but I want to have my own kids. I have expectations for my future. I think it will be exhausting to have to fight the entire world for just doing *shongshar* (household, domestic life) with someone just because they're a woman. When you're bisexual, you have the easier choice of compromising. Perhaps I don't love this guy, but he's a guy. It's societally accepted, I guess I'll settle.

Unfolding like a fantasy, Maha's future plans seemed to be rooted in reality. She sounded pragmatic, she had 'a practical point of view'. She understood the risks of 'being so intentionally in love' with Sally, and the inevitability of imminent 'marriage talks'. I probed

further: 'Would you really consider going to Canada someday?' Maha contemplated on my question: 'There is a possibility', she said, 'higher education is a way'. She has thought about applying to Canada, but has not acted on it yet. On the one hand there is unfinished business: loose threads of a relationship, possibilities of a reunion. On the other hand, there are ten years in between, years that allowed them both to evolve as very different people. 'If I get into a relationship with her, I see it as a temporary thing once again', Maha said. 'Temporary, as in, when I'm there. When I move away, it ends once again.'

Maha's possible future with Sally is conditional. Something that might happen someday provided that something else happens. A retirement plan that can only come to fruition *if* both of their hypothetical husbands die. A temporary event that can occur for a fleeting moment in Canada – *only* in Canada, *if* Maha goes to Canada. There are other events that take precedence over the potential of this future: parental expectations, her own expectations, marriage, children. In her word, *shongshar* – household, domestic life; both a noun and a verb, a thing that one has but also a thing that one does. Reuniting with Sally is essentially fiction, Canada a utopia. My choice of Sally as a pseudonym is no coincidence. Maha recounted her memory of studying *Mrs. Dalloway* to me: she has a husband and a suitor and is constantly wavering between them, while forgetting this one woman that she was genuinely in love with, all this time. 'I was like, okay, that rings a bell', Maha told me, 'That character's name is Sally Seton, so I call my ex the Sally Seton of my life'.

Maha's potential future plan is also a contradiction. It can only happen in the future, but that future is hard to imagine. It is particularly hard to imagine in Bangladesh. *If* Maha had told Sally to come back, *if* Sally had indeed come back, 'what would the future be of that'? Maha cannot imagine such a future because things, she feels, 'have gotten progressively bad for women here', and more so 'if you're bi or gay'. In such an instance, asking Sally to come back would be cruel ('Why would I do that to you?'), not asking her would be an act of care. Unless Maha moves to Canada ('where it's okay…'). But then comes the array of expectations: marriage, children. As a bisexual woman, Maha has 'the easier choice of compromising' by settling with a man. Another contradiction, essentially, as the choice itself is a compromise.

I read the someday-somewhere-ness of Maha's queer future alongside José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) queer futurity. 'Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet

queer' (p. 1). Muñoz elaborates on this queer ideality further: distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. And future is queerness's domain, it is the thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, something is missing. 'Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence of potentiality or concrete possibility for another world (p. 1). Maha's queerness is distilled from the past ('the fact that I *was* queer, the fact that I *had* a lesbian relationship'), but the future it imagines is fairly abstract. Even though Muñoz's queer futurity invokes hope, Maha struggles to hold on to it.

While there are concrete possibilities of another world for Maha (in this case Canada, through higher education), these possibilities are not explored. Because Maha's queer future also communicates to Lee Edelman's (2004) queer futurity, or the lack thereof. Reproductive futurity is reserved for the heterosexual, Edelman claims. Maha wants to get married, Maha wants children – children of her own. That can only happen in a heterosexual future, not in a queer one. Rainbow families do exist, but not within the vicinity of Maha's imagination of acceptable futures in Bangladesh. In such an instance, Edelman calls for a denunciation of hope, and an affirmation of the lack of a reproductive future. This time, Maha refuses to accept such hopelessness, and decides to choose reproductive futurism when the time comes. Maha, in this respect, has two possible futures. Like two alternate universes, one negates the other.

'New Women' and 'Good Future'

Maha's bifurcated futures are imagined based on circumstances of the present. Therefore, I would like to take a detour to explore the present. In order to do so, I will look at two essays by Elora Halim Chowdhury (2018) and Suborna Camellia (2021). Both essays address the emerging South Asian feminist scholarship of 'new womanhood', and by extension, 'new girlhood', and how this discourse shapes women's perception of a good future. I wish to explore if this image of 'new womanhood', and the subsequent 'good future' that they are meant to aspire to, correspond to the desires of my participants.

Who are the 'new women'? And, if they are the 'new' women, how do they differ from the 'old'? Both Chowdhury and Camellia provide an overview of how this 'new woman' is defined: they are autonomous consumers and modern citizens, they are highly educated middle-class women who constantly negotiate and challenge normative structures, they

are active agents of their lives. They do not resemble the older generation of women who are characterised by their sufferings in the hands of patriarchal cultural and religious structures. Chowdhury critiques this notion of the 'new woman' and argues that such a discourse – shaped by the logic of neocolonial capitalism – creates a false dichotomy that puts women in contradicting and competing positions as both 'downtrodden/victim' and 'modern/autonomous' citizens (p. 49). The discourse of the 'new woman' highlights highly selective success narratives while obscuring its often violent subtext. Chowdhury elaborates on this argument by examining Taslima Akhter's photograph *The Death of a Thousand Dreams* (2013), Rubaiyat Hossain's film *Under Construction* (2015), Tahmima Anam's short story 'Garments' (2016), and an ad campaign by the Bengali language national daily *Prothom Alo*. Camellia, on the other hand, presents findings from a year-long (between 2016 to 2017) collection of interviews, focus group discussions, and small talks with thirty-two middle-class Dhaka-dwelling girls aged between 15 to 19 to investigate what counts as a 'good future' to them. She proposes that the notion of this 'new womanhood' acts as an integral part in shaping the aspirations of the new generation of girls in Dhaka.

The 'new woman' is the antithesis of her mother. Participants in Camellia's research aspire to have a life that contrasts the lives of their mothers. They wish to live a life that offers dignity and respect – something that is not readily given to women in a patriarchal society but needs to be earned. And such a standard can be reached through a successful career and a successful marriage. This is what entails a 'good future': economic independence and a marriage that has an equal power relation. Camellia's participants are aware that resources are limited – there is high level of competition in both the labour market and the marriage market. They are also aware that the playing field is uneven, and the expectations are gendered. In order to stay ahead of the competition, they agree that appearance plays a key role. One has to look good in order to achieve a future that is good. The three case studies that Camellia presents use words such as 'appealing', 'sexy', 'confident', 'change-maker', and 'cool', among a few, to explain the ideal appearance (pp. 78, 79, 81). Camellia argues that even though on the surface it appears that these girls are reinforcing existing patriarchal ideas, under the surface they are navigating their road to a good future with critical consciousness and political awareness. Perhaps their aspirations are being shaped by neoliberal development discourses of women's

empowerment through education and entry into the labour market, but they are also actively shaping these discourses by consciously participating in the process. However, Camellia also adds that the choices that these young women can make are also confined within certain social boundaries, making the apparently liberating concept of 'new womanhood' restrictive in practice.

The 'new woman's success is also the success of the nation. Chowdhury illustrates this with her discussion of the *Prothom Alo* ad campaign:

> One such poster features a young woman in a white *shalwar kameez* and a green and red *orna* signifying the colours of the Bangladeshi flag. The woman is wearing an expression of bold confidence and holding a tiffin box, giving the impression of a person on their way to work. The backdrop shows what could be construed a shop floor. The poster bears the following message: 'As long as the country is in your hands, Bangladesh will not lose its way.' (p. 61, italics added)

Chowdhury explains how the image puts the burden of the nation's progress on the hands of the 'new woman'. The young women in Camellia's study seem to have internalised this discourse as well. Some of them connect the idea of individual wellbeing with notions of the nation's progress: 'They said that they want to see Bangladesh as a violence-free country where everyone enjoys equal rights (*shoman odhikar*). They thought that in order to turn Bangladesh into such a country, girls collectively need to push boundaries further with their academic and extracurricular success' (p. 76). Their vision is much greater: if the new women reach their good future, the nation will reach its good future too.

I find these two texts significant in understanding the current vision board of aspirations for women in Bangladesh. I also appreciate how they, in their own ways, unpack the 'new women' discourses, while questioning and critiquing them. I have two particular points of focus from these two texts. Firstly, it is apparent that the notion of women's empowerment (e.g., the 'new women' and their 'good future') is deeply embedded within development discourses. The texts that Chowdhury chooses to examine – the photograph, the film, the short story – are all either situated within, or contains in varying degrees, the theme of development in the form of garment factories and garment workers. Camellia's participants also envision their good future in terms of a career, and keep an eye open for opportunities that will allow them to get closer to their goal. Camellia noted that several

of her participants wanted to look good in front of her, and was interested in the interview because they saw it as a networking opportunity to help them with their future plans of going to Western countries for higher education. But what is beyond the development discourse? I am compelled to wonder if a contemporary successful Bangladeshi woman can be imagined outside of it. Because, as I will discuss in the next sections, such a discourse fails to correspond to my participants' lives – in fact, it exhausts them.

Secondly, the 'new woman' has a give-and-take relation with the nation and society. As discussed above, women's success and the nation's success have been established as intertwined. The nation, therefore, produces narratives that gives women room to breathe, only under certain conditions. Both Chowdhury and Camellia point out that women are now encouraged to pursue higher education and contribute to the economy, as long as they eventually settle into marriage, reproduction, and domesticity. Marriage, while still a requirement, has become flexible. Love marriages are no longer disapproved of as opposed to arranged marriages, and delayed marriages are accepted as opposed to early marriages. But, if the 'good future' eventually morphs into a happy marriage – the option that Maha reluctantly chooses, and, as we will soon see, Nusrat dreads and Sraboni is irritated by – I suspect that it may not be the ideal future for queer women in Bangladesh.

My understanding is that this particular genre of development-oriented and individualised women's success stories prevalent in Bangladesh are characteristically similar to McRobbie's (2004) notion of post-feminism. Formed in the context of the UK, McRobbie's argument is that post-feminism is an active process that has gradually undermined the feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s. She proposes that elements of contemporary popular culture (McRobbie's text of choice here is the film *Bridget Jones's Diary* from 2001), while appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and well-intended response to feminism, have also been partaking in its undoing. Especially with its use of the tropes of freedom and choice – tropes which are now inextricably connected with the category of 'young women' – feminism is made to appear aged and redundant. The only value, then, feminism appears to have, is being understood as a thing of the past, and a mere spectre in the present. McRobbie describes post-feminism as a 'double entanglement', which 'comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life' while simultaneously having 'processes of

liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations' (pp. 255-256). Due to the advent of post-feminism, the emphasis in feminist interests gradually shifted from centralised power blocks such as the state, patriarchy, and law, to more dispersed sites such as events and discourses. What followed were emerging notions of feminist success. But, 'What might be the criteria for judging degrees of feminist success?', McRobbie asks (p. 257). In the UK, feminist success manifested in the championing of young women as a 'metaphor for social change' (p. 257). In the context of the 'impoverished zones' (quotations added) of the world, it manifested in the minds and bodies of young women via governments and NGOs who present education as the promise of economic and demographic rewards. Young women are a 'good investment', and the 'privileged subjects of social change' (p. 258). In both cases, however, the success of these young women is attributed to female individualism, not on feminism. Once established as individuals, young women must now make choices regarding every aspect of their lives: including but not limited to the jobs they want to work in and the people they want to marry. If one chooses right, one can essentially win at life. If one chooses wrong, one fails at life. Individuals, therefore, are encouraged to be 'the kind of subject who can make the right choices' (p. 261). Because, either way, the results are attributed to personal responsibility.

Given that these aspirational roadmaps do not cater to the needs or desires of my participants, they find themselves in a strange position: having to bear the burden of achieving a future that they do not necessarily want; having to make choices that are essentially compromises. These aspirational mood-boards do not work for them. In fact, they get in the way of the futures that they truly want for themselves.

Cruel Optimism and Fraying Fantasies

I mentioned in Chapter 2 – when I asked Maha what it was like being a bisexual woman in Bangladesh, she replied, 'Not much'. Not much happens. 'There is a part of me that doesn't get to come out and play that much', she said. I asked Maha, 'Would that part come out and play if you moved?' To this, Maha replied with a resonant yes:

> Oh, yeah (emphatic). Not just part of me, all of me (laughs). As a woman in Dhaka, you suppress so much of yourself. I want an undercut. I want a short Diana cut, like

> I used to have in school. Me, my ex, and another best friend of ours, we used to be the tomboys of the school. In grade nine-ten, every girl had, you know, *lomba lomba chul* (really long hair), and we would have this length of hair (gestures a bob-length hair) and we would go around and make trouble. I still have short hair, but I want a cool, tomboyish look.

Maha's statement reminded me of *Fleabag* (2016). In the fifth episode of season two, Fleabag, the titular character of the series, responds to her sister's emergency call for help over an unflattering haircut. They rush back to confront the hairdresser, who, of course, refuses to get involved and claims that hair isn't everything. Fleabag, with the utmost conviction in her voice, declares, 'Hair *is* everything. We wish it wasn't so we could actually think about something else occasionally. But it is'.

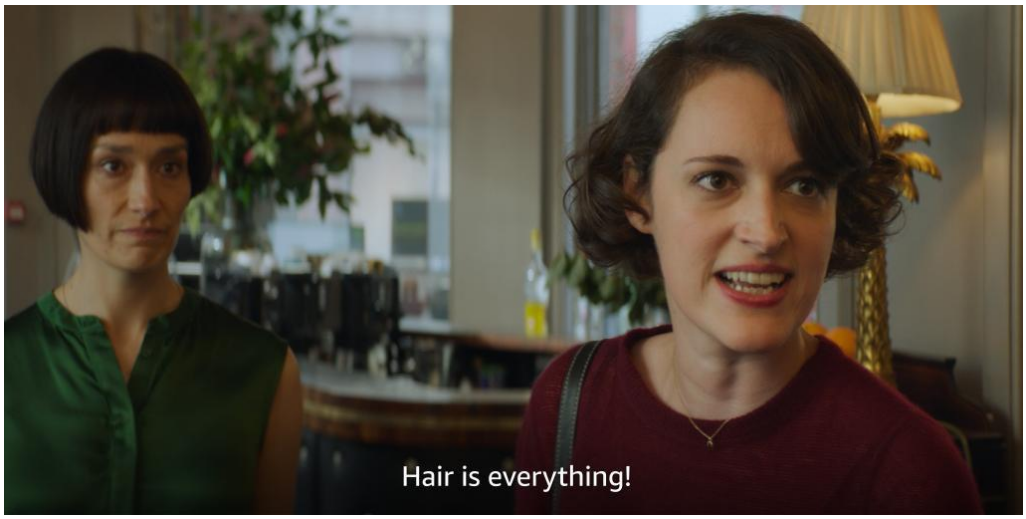

Figure 3.1 Hair is everything – scene from *Fleabag* (2016)

While hair may not be *everything*, it is a lot of things. It can help one feel more like themselves, as Hannah McCann (2022) discovers as she researches queer hair salons in Australia. It can also determine a person's sense of belonging in a place. Faye Rosas Blanch (2020), an artist, discusses using hair in her performance as a defining element of her identity. She recognizes that her hair, and her experiences with her hair, shape and contribute to her memory. Her hair positions her – as an Indigenous person from a particular language group with family members who have very similar textures of hair.

While Blanch highlights hair as a signifier of racial difference, Maha's thoughts about her hair has ties with the memory of her days in school (when it was okay being a 'tomboy' – but not anymore), and the embodied expression of her gender and sexual identity.

It is not just hair that makes Maha feel confined and dissatisfied. It is her clothes too:

> I want to dress in unisex clothes. I've seen people do that in Japan, wear clothes that don't flaunt their gender. I want to wear shirts and pants like that, and sexy clothes (with a naughty tone) as a woman too. But I have to settle for *salwar kameez* (a traditional attire worn by women across numerous regions in South Asia). If I dress in any way at all sexy, I would have to cover myself up as I'm going, then de-clothe (with a comical tone) when I'm at the venue, and then cover myself back up and come home (laughs). So, that is that. As a woman, I think, I've really negotiated with the crazy, extroverted side of mine. I try to be calm, Zen (laughs). I try to act like an adult, not the way I really want to.

Even with clothes, Maha settles. The clothing and de-clothing becomes a tangible manifestation of how Maha negotiates her identities, how she allows one to emerge and suppresses another. She feels conscious of the antagonistic surveillance her hometown imposes on her; she denies herself choices that would make her happy – even choices as simple as her desired appearance. Something as seemingly small as being able to choose a haircut and an attire contributes to her relationship with the city where she spent her entire life, a city where she now feels constantly monitored but never seen. A disruption in her desires makes her want to leave. Her dissatisfaction with her present circumstances compels her to envision a future which is not here but elsewhere.

However, while Maha envisions leaving, she does not actually leave. She stays – with Canada in the background of her thoughts, and a potential marriage-and-children future in the foreground. My inkling is that she stays because the relationship she has with this marriage-and-children version of the future is a relationship of cruel optimism. 'A relation of cruel optimist exists', Lauren Berlant (2011) says, 'when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (p. 1). These kinds of optimistic relations are not inherently cruel, she adds. Rather, they become cruel when the object that draws your attachment actively obstructs the aim that brought you towards that object in the first place. According to Berlant, the affective structure of an optimistic attachment involves

this sustaining tendency that takes you back to the scene of fantasy, again and again, and makes you want to believe 'that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way' (p. 2). But optimism can be cruel in such an instance where the object or scene that ignites this sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the transformation that a person risks striving. Moreover, optimism can be doubly cruel when the very pleasures of being in such a situation surpasses the content of the situation – because the situation, even if one of profound threat, is at the same time profoundly confirming. Staying happily in an unhappy relation, for example. Because, even though the relation is unhappy, at least it exists, and we are not alone. But if we know that it is an unhappy relation, why do we stay? Why do we stay in relations of cruel optimism?

People stay, Berlant proposes, because of 'that moral-intimate-economic thing called "the good life"' (p. 2). If a good-life fantasy is what makes people stay, what happens when those fantasies start to fray? Here comes Berlant's 'impasse'. Berlant claims that the present, first and foremost, is felt affectively. And the word that she uses to track the sense of the present is 'impasse' (p. 4). Usually an impasse suggests 'a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward' (p. 4). It suggests an in-betweenness, a deadlock, a stalemate. Even when good-life fantasies begin to fray, Berlant says, living in an impasse becomes an aspiration for many – 'adjustment seems like an accomplishment' (p. 3). In times of crisis, an impasse puts things on hold, provides a temporary housing. Berlant describes crisis in the current times as systemic crisis or 'crisis ordinariness', where it is 'not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming' (p. 10). In the impasse induced by crisis, Berlant declares, 'being treads water; mainly, it does not drown' (p. 10).

As Maha's fantasies begin to fray, crisis ordinariness manifests in her life as unhappy haircuts and uncomfortable clothes. It manifests in existing in the perpetual in-betweenness of Canada and Bangladesh, and the possible futures that they offer. When I went back to Dhaka in 2022, I met Maha in person. She told me more about her experiences of crisis ordinariness: the fast-paced changes of urban development, the disillusionment of fraying good-life fantasies, and the exhaustion from surviving and not thriving.

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I knock Maha on Messenger to tell her that I am in Dhaka, and that I would love to meet her for a coffee or tea at least once before I leave. I tell her how long I would be there, and she says, 'Oh no, you'll miss the wedding'. 'What wedding? Your wedding?', I ask. It's a brand new twist in the story and I need more details. 'Please meet me before I go, I cannot with the suspense', I tell her. Maha laughs and says okay. We decide on a date and a location that works for both of us. She asks me how my visit is going so far. 'It feels quite uncanny to be back,' I tell her, 'things have changed a lot in just three years'. 'Yeah, things are changing rapidly in this city,' she says, 'It's exhausting to keep up'.

On the day of the meeting, I arrive first at our chosen coffee shop. Maha messages that she is ten minutes away. Ten minutes later she says that she needs ten more minutes, she is still stuck in traffic. She apologises but I tell her that it's all good. She doesn't have any control over the Dhaka traffic after all. She arrives soon after and we hug. We order food and we sit down. The first questions I ask her are based on our Messenger chat: What is changing in Dhaka? What exhausts you? Maha expresses her discontent about the "development" going on in the city. 'The development is taking a toll on my body', she says. Her house is near the newly-constructed metro rail, so she experiences the commotion and the pollution very closely. Her new position in a new institution proves to be a double-edged sword too. On the one hand she feels stuck and burned out. 'Nothing is giving me true joy', she says. While she is in a highly craved-for position, she doesn't feel that it is stimulating her enough creatively or intellectually. 'I feel like I am not growing,' she adds. On the other hand, however, the pressures of being in the demanding new job, and in the city in general, is endless; so much so that she has been on stress medication. 'You can't be sober and survive Dhaka', she tells me.

Our croissant sandwiches and coffee arrive. 'Tell me about your wedding', I say to her. 'We matched on Bumble', she begins. After dating for a while, they both realised that they have fallen in love. Soon after, they decided to get married. 'Does he know that you're bisexual?', I ask Maha. He knows, she tells me, but he isn't prejudiced about it. In fact, he jokes about how everyone is his competition. She looks happy talking about him. I ask her how it feels to be getting married. There is excitement, she tells me, but also dread and despondence. There are too many things to do, and too many people involved. Her family is happy that she is

getting married, her mother in particular. Once Maha turned twenty-seven, her mother would cry every now and then and worry about her marriage. Now she is excited that the day has arrived. Even though it is a love marriage, which Maha's mother doesn't entirely approve of, it is marriage. Her sister is very enthusiastic about it too. While they were estranged for several years, the wedding has softened the edges of their discord.

'Whatever happened to Canada?', I ask Maha. Sally might soon get married as well, she says. They are both happy with the current situation that they are in. They have both evolved into such different people than they were nearly a decade ago. Going to Canada and trying again now would mean to force something that isn't there anymore. Nostalgia alone, after all, is not enough to sustain a relationship.

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Maha sits in traffic, Maha feels stuck. Maha's stuckedness is both physical (with the traffic) and existential (with her job – the one that exhausts her but does not stimulate her). Both the development in the city and the stress of her job affects Maha's body. She embodies the consequences, she fights them with stress medications. She essentially intoxicates herself to survive Dhaka. I referred to Hasan Ashraf (2017a, 2017b) in Chapter 1. In his ethnographic exploration of the experience of working in Bangladeshi garments industries, he discovers that the workers feel the garment-world to be a distinct world, one which is run by 'garment-time' (2017a, p. 96). This world is easy to enter, hard to exit. The labour process in the garment-world induces *chaap* (pressure) and *bhoy* (fear) in the workers (2017b, p.265) – they experience *shomoy-er chaap* (pressure of time), they experience *mistake-r bhoy* (fear of mistake). This *chaap* and *bhoy* are embodied experiences, they manifest in their bodies: the heart pounds, the body feels week. Maha's job is a white-collar academic job, as opposed to the blue-collar labour in the garments factories. But the stress remains inescapable. Surely, the physical consequences are far more extreme in a garments factory (Ashraf details the deadly effects of fabric dust, chemical sprays, cutting machines, sewing machines, and more), but the stress of the labour process transfers and travels across fields of labour. Maha relies on stress medications to tackle it. The stress travels transnationally too, as I reach for sleeping medications in the final months of writing my thesis – trying to meet the demands of the 'PhD-world' and reach the deadlines of the 'PhD-time'.

There is also a larger sense of hopelessness, a larger sense of impending doom, that Maha feels. Things are getting 'progressively bad', she said. She also told me during the interview that she felt it was getting harder to be a woman in Dhaka. 'Ideologies are getting more and more extreme', she said, 'the polarisation is getting quite unbearable'. Dhaka now appears to be contrast from the Dhaka she remembered from her youth: 'I remember Dhaka being a much more tolerant place when I was younger, but now…' I believe this larger sense of hopelessness affects one's personal sense of achievement, and the fulfillment it is expected to bring. Maha has achieved the good-life fantasy – she has the right job, she is marrying the right man. And yet. Maha has left the impasse – she has chosen her future, she no longer waits in the in-between space. But now she experiences stuckedness. I will discuss Hage's stuckedness – an affective parallel to Berlant's impasse – in the next section.

(When I showed Maha my field notes, she informed me that Sally got married a few months ago too. I told her that I will include that as a sidenote.)

'Stuckedness', or Dhaka

Maha's stuckedness, as I claimed, is an existential one. Ghassan Hage (2009) discusses existential mobility – a form of imaginary mobility that evokes the sense that one is 'going somewhere', a requirement of a viable life (p. 97). Hage explores this notion in relation to transnational Lebanese migration and White racists in the West. He discusses how these subjects attempt to avoid the opposite – existential immobility, or 'stuckedness'. Hage argues that while people can experience various kinds of stuckedness at all times and places, 'the social and historical conditions of permanent crisis that we live in have led to a proliferation and intensification of this sense of stuckedness' (p. 97). Additionally, this increasing sense of stuckedness has been normalised. Instead of perceiving it as something one needs to get out of, one is encouraged to ambivalently, inevitably, endure it. Herein lies Hage's main argument: 'such a mode of confronting the crisis by a celebration of one's capacity to stick it out rather than calling for change, contains a specific experience of waiting that is referred to in common language as 'waiting it out'' (pp. 97-98).

Waiting out is different than waiting: it is a specific form of waiting where one is not waiting for something but rather is waiting for something undesirable to end. Waiting can be either active or passive. Waiting out, however, is always passive, and this passivity is an ambivalent one. Hage argues that this ambivalence is what makes waiting out 'a governmental tool that encourages a mode of restraint, self-control and self-government in times of crisis'. An example he discusses is that of the queue – how the queue symbolises social order, and involves an orderly form of mobility. Queueing to wait for the bus, for instance. But suppose, Hage asks, the bus does not come? A disruption such as this, or a crisis, can create a sense of stuckedness. That, in turn, can trigger a questioning or rethinking of the existing social order, giving way to upheaval or even revolution. However, crisis is not the same it was before. Hege elaborates that crisis today is not an unusual state of affairs that encourages citizens to question the order of things. Rather, it is perceived as a normalcy, a permanent state of exception. Enduring the crisis, therefore, becomes the normal mode of being a good citizen. And this waiting out is self-reproducing: 'the more one waits and invests in waiting, the more reluctant one is to stop waiting' (p. 104). To break free from this stuckedness, Hage proposes, is to be restless and impatient, to refuse to wait.

Which is why, I suppose, Maha contemplates Canada – soon we will learn that Nusrat contemplates it too. Hage connects the equation of well-being with a sense of mobility. He takes statements such as 'How are you going?', or its Lebanese counterpart 'Keef e haal?', literally meaning 'How is the state of your being?', which is commonly responded to as 'Mehsheh'l haal', literally meaning 'The state of my being is walking.' (p. 98). This language of movement, he argues, not only functions as a metaphor but also conveys a sense of wellbeing. You feel well when you feel that you are moving well. Existential mobility is such an imagined or felt movement. In relation to migration, one engages in a physical form of mobility because they are after existential mobility. In this sense, migration becomes an act inspired by the search for a space that makes possible the feeling of movement or going somewhere, as opposed to the feeling of stuckedness or going nowhere. Or, at least, the quality of their going-ness is better than what it was in the space that they left behind. What is referred to as voluntary migration is often, Hage claims, the inability or unwillingness to endure and wait out a crisis of existential mobility.

Similar to Lebanese, the language of movement exists in Bangla as well. The question 'Kemon achho?' or, 'Kee obostha?' – 'How are you?' or, 'How is the state of your being?' – is often responded to with the single word 'Cholchhe'; 'It's going', or 'It's moving'. There is a slightly passive response as well – 'Chole jachchhe' or, 'Kete jachchhe'; literally, it is going by or it is passing by, almost insinuating that life is passing one by, while one stands still. Being in an impasse can make one feel like life is passing them by. Stuckedness makes Maha (and Nusrat) consider leaving, moving physically to achieve existential mobility. It is not just Maha and Nusrat – the urban young members in Taposhi's queer community plan on moving too, Camellia's participants hope to move as well. Shuchi Karim (2021) discovered that there has been an increase in single people of both genders going abroad – seemingly for higher studies, but latently to lead a more independent and private life away from home. I would argue that it is not just independence and privacy but a desire to get unstuck that compels them to move too.

However, Maha does not go to Canada. She stays, she waits. We will soon see that Nusrat waits too. Hage argues that waiting out, and the heroism of stuckedness, inevitably takes on the dimensions of race and class. I would like to add that it takes the dimension of gender too. There are gendered experiences of stuckedness, as there are gendered expectations of waiting out the crisis. Maha remains to address her parents' expectations, her own expectations. She modifies her future plans. She contemplates a utopia, but it consists of pragmatic choices.

Nusrat also experiences crisis ordinariness, and by extension, stuckedness. When she moved to Dhaka from Khulna, it was both an occupational obligation and a conscious decision to stay far from home. A new job presented an opportunity for her to be able to live on her own. It also made it easier for her to convince her family of her move. 'I used to give a lot of importance to the fact that my presence at home was a source of comfort and mental peace for my family', she said, 'but now I *had* to move away'. While her family was not entirely at ease with her decision at first, they grew to accept it, they *had* to. 'How has it been so far?', I asked Nusrat. 'Really good', she said. It was not difficult for her to find her first accommodation since she moved in as a sublet. Her quest to finding her own place, however, was difficult:

> I'm looking for a place right now. A two-room flat. People at home want to come visit me sometimes, my mother especially. And that's totally normal – now that I'm in Dhaka, they want to come and visit. I want to have my own place for that. But now that I'm looking for a place, they ask me if I'm single or if I'm going to stay with family. When I tell them I'm single, they tell me that they aren't renting to bachelors right now. They will in the future, and they'll let me know. But I need the place now, not in the future. I knocked them again and told them that I will stay there with my mother. Then they agreed to show me some flats. They don't want to rent to single women.

The difficulties of renting accommodations as single women surfaces in Karim's research (2021) as well. She elucidates that in Bangladeshi culture, adult unmarried children are expected to live with their parents, regardless of their gender identity. However, as one of her participants shares, if women choose to accommodate independent living spaces, they are often suspected to have 'loose morals' (p. 5, quotations added), making renting apartments an arduous process. I did not know it then, but I would know soon, that there are certain loopholes in renting arrangements, and there are ways for women navigate them, Nusrat herself included.

Even after moving to Dhaka, Nusrat still contemplated moving farther away every now and then. While she enjoyed the job and her current living situation, she felt that it was getting harder. 'Some issues are popping up', she said. 'Literally today', she added, that she ruminated on leaving everything behind and going someplace else. But she was also aware that it may not be as easy as moving within the country – 'Even if I want to go to a different country, say Canada, for example, I will still need a couple of years of experience'. I asked her what these issues were that were emerging. 'People are getting really bothered with the fact that I'm living alone', she said. I asked her who these people were, and if they were family members or relatives: 'Say, for instance, if I go to a *dawat* (literally, invitation; similar to a dinner invite), first they ask me where I study. I tell them that I finished my master's and I'm doing a job right now. Then they start going on about how I should get married. And these are not even people close to me. Just random people'.

The surveillance Maha feels from strangers about her appearance, Nusrat feels from 'just random people' about marriage. Their Unsolicited suggestions and intrusive interests frustrates her enough to wonder if she wants to continue living in Bangladesh:

> Nusrat: I mean, if I really don't ever want to get married, what will happen? Also, suppose I don't feel like getting married. But if people keep telling me that I made a mistake, I'll have to live with that forever! And no one would even marry me then (laughs). What a disaster! I don't want to think about whether or not I made a mistake for the rest of my life!
>
> Anika: So, if you leave the country, you won't worry about that?
>
> N: No! Because no one would constantly keep whining about that to me! When people keep telling you something again and again, you also start doubting yourself.

This is where the burden of choosing compromises reveals itself. Like the choices illustrated in *Dhee*, Nusrat feels that she has two options (and only two options) – get married or go abroad. Nusrat does not want to get married now. But her worries are less about the present and more about the future. What if she *never* wants to get married? If not getting married is a problem now, it will become a bigger problem in the future. And it will be bigger not only because of the interference from people but also because of the self-doubt that it will produce. For her, the bigger fear is not making the 'mistake' of not getting married (which she does not really consider a mistake in the first place) but having these 'random people' be proven right and 'live with that forever'. And by then, eligible grooms will disappear too. The cruelty in the cruel optimism of marriage does not let Nusrat go. She also wants to leave, go to 'say Canada, for example'. But until Canada, she looks for a house to rent in Dhaka.

Nusrat did, eventually, get the flat that she was looking at. Luckily, I had the opportunity of seeing it firsthand. When I visited her in her home, she told me about renting agencies and the loopholes they accommodate, as well as her deferred plans of a future in Canada.

*

Once in Dhaka, I ask Nusrat when we can meet. 'I'm in Khulna right now, but I'll be back by the end of the month', she tells me, 'I'll knock you then'. She knocks me again in two weeks. 'Come to my house this weekend', she says. She sends me her address, tells me to come early and have lunch with her. I take an Uber on a Saturday and call her once I get down, as instructed. Nusrat arrives and I follow her, walking from the main road towards a few narrower lanes through to her house. Her house is bright and spacious. Two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a small living space, a small kitchen, and a balcony. I tell her how much I like her place. 'I rented it through B-property', she says. I tell her that I don't know what that is. She explains that it is an agency through which one can rent apartments in Dhaka. 'The landlady is nice', she says. 'She did tell me to not bring any boyfriends here though', she laughs as she tells me this. Nusrat shares this house with a friend of hers. 'It's difficult to rent places as single women in Dhaka', she tells me, as she did before when I interviewed her. 'When I rented this place, I told them that I was going to stay here with my mother. My mother does stay here when she comes to Dhaka, but she doesn't live here. The agency knows this. They are also aware of the loopholes and accommodate them'.

Nusrat asks what I want to have for lunch, says she wants to order something on Foodpanda. We scroll the options for a while and then decide on beef achari khichuri *(a dish made of beef, rice, lentils, and olive pickles). While waiting for the food, we chat about random things. I ask her about her family, and the whereabouts of some of our mutual friends. We devour the food once it arrives, and then Nusrat makes some* dudh cha *(milk tea). With cups of tea in hand, we continue chatting. Nusrat looks happy in her home. 'I like living alone', she says. She had some problems in the beginning, she tells me, like loneliness. But now she has some colleagues who have become her friends. Sometimes they visit too. Work is going well for her. She asks me about my work, and wants to know what interesting thing I have read recently. I tell her about Ghassan Hage's piece on 'stuckedness'. She seems really keen to hear about it, says that she understands. 'Everyone is depressed these days', she says. 'I think we had more joy when we were younger, we had dreams of becoming something. But now even teenagers are depressed', she continues. 'Things have changed. People have become much more opinionated, but in a bad way'. I ask her about her plans to move to Canada. She tells me that she is still contemplating on it. There are no concrete plans to execute a move abroad as of yet. 'I worry about my parents, she says. 'They have reached a certain age where they*

need frequent check-ups, and I'm in charge of their doctors' visits'. Nusrat's parents stay at her place when they come for check-ups. Her Canada plans remain deferred because of her present more pressing responsibilities towards her parents.

We eat some chocolates next, while we talk about ourselves and the states of our being. Our 'stuckedness' and our shared and collective depression. I forget about my research. While I have every intention to ask her more follow-up questions from the interview, I accept that in this instance I am no more a researcher than I am a friend, meeting another friend after years.

*

The sense of hopelessness that Maha feels, Nusrat feels too. She reminisces the joy she felt when she was younger, because 'everyone is depressed these days'. Her thoughts are similar to Maha's thoughts on extremities and polarisations – 'Things have changed. People have become much more opinionated, but in a bad way'. In my interview with Nusrat, she was critical of the *waz* (Islamic religious sermons) that are performed in mosques. 'I feel like we are getting into the era of the *waz*', she said, 'It seems like their primary concern is to talk about women – what women should and shouldn't do. I don't think homophobia is something that comes up in *waz*, it all becomes about women'. Yasmin said something in a similar vein: 'I remember there was a *waz* going on near my house, and the things they were saying about women! I was like, what are you even waz-ing about (laughs)!' But Nusrat remains aware that religious extremism does not exist in a void, it is connected to other external factors. A collapsing education system, for example. I mentioned in Chapter 2 that Nusrat advocated for caution regarding queer visibility. 'The law is not in our support', she said. She provided another rationale in the context of the *waz*: 'I feel like for something to be normalised, it needs to happen in stages. One thing needs to be stable for the other to follow'. Her understanding is that an improvement in the lives of queer people cannot happen unless it happens in the lives of women. Such a situation makes the lives of queer women all the more complicated.

So, Nusrat thinks about Canada. But then, she prioritises her responsibility towards her parents. Until Canada, she at least has a home of her own.

Radical Hopelessness and the Last Happy Person in Dhaka

Among my three participants based in Dhaka, Sraboni was the only one who did not contemplate leaving. Sraboni moved to Dhaka when she was in class six. She lived with her paternal aunt while in Dhaka and finished school. Throughout college and university, she stayed in hostels and dormitories. After finishing her undergrad and postgrad in Gender Studies at a public university in Dhaka, she was studying photography and was slowly adopting it as her profession. Sraboni told me that she enjoyed Dhaka. While she missed being away from her parents, there are certain benefits to the distance: 'All my friends are here. I like living on my own, travelling on my own. I'm used to this, I can do what I like.' Her parents visit about once a month. They have accepted that Sraboni has cultivated a life here. They do not question her about lifestyle choices such as coming home late: 'They don't bother anymore'.

This is not to say that cultivating a life here has been simple. Sraboni's parents own a place in Dhaka. Once every month they come to Dhaka and stay there, the rest of the year it remains empty. Sraboni is staying there for now, but she needs to shift soon and find a place in a location more convenient for her work. Renting houses has been a challenge. She has found a flat which is being rented by a couple of women – she will share a room with a roommate. She has not yet been able to rent a place by herself because, yet again, 'no one wants to rent to bachelors'.

Then, of course, there are the marriage talks. While Sraboni's friends, cousins, older brother and sister-in-law know that she is homosexual, her parents do not know. I asked her if she ever considered telling them:

> Sraboni: I want to. I mean, if I could, I would tell them now, now that I've reached a marriageable age (smiles). Folks at home have started giving me some pressure to get married. I keep telling them that I won't get married now, or I will get married someday, or I won't get married ever… But how long can one keep doing that? So, I just want to tell them. But my brother doesn't want me to do that yet, which is why I'm not saying anything (laughs).
>
> Anika: What are you going to do then?

S: I was thinking of living separately. I don't worry too much about my father, but my mother is very emotional. Whenever I say I don't want to get married, she starts crying. If I tell her this, she'll probably have a heart attack (laughs).

A: (Laughs) How are you going to avoid this pressure then?

S: I'm just going to say that I'm not getting married at all. I mean, a person can have many different reasons to not want to get married. I'll just have to set it up like that. And then, whoever I live with is none of anyone's business. I have the liberty of going about however I like, since I have lived on my own for a long time, and people at home are used to it. If I live with someone else along the line, they won't bother about it. In fact, they will probably not even find out.

Marriage is not part of the future Sraboni envisions for herself. When I asked her if she had any future plans about her personal life or relationships, she was quite firm in her belief that getting married is not important to her to sustain a relationship – rather, it is a matter of personal commitment. However, she was aware that not getting married may not be the most sustainable plan given the societal context: 'Not just the society, my own family would pressure me. I mean, they already pressure me. Even yesterday my uncle (father's brother) came and asked me when I'm getting married (laughs)'. She understands (like Nusrat and Maha) that these marriage talks are part of the package of reaching a marriageable age.

It is not just her marriage that Sraboni's parents worry about, they worry about her career as well. 'My mother, especially', she said, 'She has no satisfaction at all, either about her own life or about mine'. Sraboni studied gender previously, and now she was studying photography. Neither of these disciplines appear sustainable to her parents. It is not so much disapproval as it is confusion on their part regarding Sraboni's career trajectory: 'Photography's a hobby, not a profession, what am I even going to do with it… These are the things they are confused about'. Sraboni's mother often suggests her to sit for the BSC (Bangladesh Civil Services) exams, or do a master's or a PhD abroad. But Sraboni is reluctant to go abroad:

Even if I ever do go abroad for higher studies, I wouldn't want to settle there. If I were to settle abroad, the only reason would be that I can't survive here given my

> orientation. But it feels a bit like escapism to me. There wouldn't be any other reason for me to want to settle somewhere else, I like living here.

The desires Sraboni's mother has for her future are not far from the prescribed good-life fantasy: a visibly successful career, a marriage. But Sraboni's and her mother's idea of success seem to differ from each other. My understanding is that the idea of women's empowerment is different across generations. There is an ideological disconnect between the two. And this disconnect does not exist in a vacuum – given that the state plays a role in representing and perpetuating particular images of empowerment (like the *Prothom Alo* ad that Chowdhury presents), the disconnect is sustained by such state-sanctioned discourses. It affects women and it affects queer women – albeit in different dimensions.

But how did Sraboni manage to escape the good-life fantasy? I could see parallels between Nusrat and Maha's troubles and hers: unwanted marriage pressure, renting crisis. But while it instilled unhappiness in Nusrat and Maha, Sraboni was happy. While it made the other two want to leave, Sraboni wanted to stay. She *liked* living in Dhaka. In fact, for Sraboni, to leave would be to escape. Of course, 'People are different from each other', Eve Sedgwick reminds us (2008, p. 8). But still, Sraboni's happiness baffles me. I read her happiness alongside Sara Ahmed's (2010) happiness.

Sara Ahmed explores not what happiness *is* but what happiness *does*. She explores how happiness is associated with some life choices and not others, and therefore how happiness evades some and not others. She suspends the belief that happiness is a good thing. After all, happiness has often had unhappy effects, having been used to justify oppression and redescribe social norms as social goods. Ahmed, therefore, prefers to focus on the alternative history of happiness – one that is rooted in unhappiness – and looks at those who have historically been banished from it. Queer people, for example. While discussing unhappy queers, she makes an intriguing point about happiness and aspirations: that they are reciprocal. Happiness is 'not just how subjects speak of their own desires but also what they want to give and receive from others' (p. 91). Verbal forms of such reciprocity reflect in statements such as 'I am happy for you', 'I want you to be happy', or 'I am happy if you are happy' (p. 91). The issue is not that happiness entails reciprocity. The issue is that there are forms of coercion that are exercised and concealed by this language of reciprocity. And it is done so to the extent that 'one person's happiness

is made conditional not only on another person's happiness but on that person's willingness to be made happy by the same things' (p. 91).

If Sraboni's happiness intrigues me, it does so because it reflects how she negotiates the opposing forces of her mother's happiness and her own, how she balances her mother's expectations and her own. The point that I attempt to make is not that different things make different people happy (which is to say that the happiness of Sraboni does not negate the unhappiness of Nusrat or Maha), but that some forms of happiness are imposed upon queer Bangladeshi women, regardless of their effect, whereas some forms of happiness are unavailable to them, regardless of their demand. Ahmed reminds us that we need to think more about the relationship between the queer struggle for a bearable life and aspirational hopes for a good life. In the case of my participants, it appears that there is often an unimaginable distance between the two, like a mirage that disappears once you reach it and reappears someplace else. While Maha and Nusrat navigate cruel optimism, Sraboni embraces something that I can only phrase as radical hopelessness.

When I met Sraboni in Dhaka, she told me more about her relationship with her mother, her brother, and her desire to remain in Dhaka despite the efforts it involves.

*

'You can come to my office anytime', says Sraboni when I ask her if we can meet. 'There's a café on the rooftop.' She gives me the address, I note it down. We settle on a date and a time. From what I remember, Sraboni is shy. It takes time for her to open up. I understand that, I even relate to that. But I wonder if this time things would be different. I interviewed her on Zoom, we had never met in person. I wonder if anything would change. On the day, I arrive a little early. I leave Sraboni a message on WhatsApp and head all the way up to the café. She arrives soon after. She asks for two coffees and refuses to let me pay. 'You're in my *office', she says. Coffee arrives quickly, we start chatting.*

I ask her what is new with her. She begins with her mother. Her mother is getting impatient with her refusal to get married. The pressure to get married increases as days go by. She keeps saying no, but she has not given them a proper reason why. 'It's really the relatives more than the parents', she says. 'The relatives bug me more. They just keep asking me why

I keep saying no'. Sraboni is mentally prepared now to tell her parents that she is a lesbian. Even her brother thinks that now is as good a time as any. But Sraboni worries. Her mother is quite a sentimental person. What if she gets sick? 'Things would have been easier if I had left the country', she tells me. But she doesn't leave. She doesn't want to. 'I suppose I could go abroad for higher studies. But I'll have to come back. I don't want to settle abroad. I won't do it just because of my orientation. It'll feel like I'm escaping'. Sraboni has said all these to me before. She says them again, without me having even asked. It feels almost as if she is re-enforcing her belief to herself, through me.

'I could *go abroad, you know', she continues. 'Where I studied, there are unofficial scholarships that go to queer people, couples especially. It would certainly make my mother happy.' Sraboni goes back to her mother. Her mother believes that going abroad for higher studies is a sign of success. She is already dissatisfied that her daughter is a photographer. There is not much money in photography. And if there is not much money, there certainly is no visible sign of success. 'If I go abroad, she will at least be able to tell people about it. Validation from others is a big deal for her.' I am no stranger to Sraboni's complicated relationship with her mother. 'At least your brother is supportive,' I chime in. 'He is', she agrees. 'He often makes jokes about other people that are misogynistic and homophobic, but he always supports me.' Her comment makes me laugh. What strikes me about Sraboni is how nonchalant she is in telling me all this. Sraboni contains a beautiful juxtaposition of seemingly dissimilar traits. She is shy, yet she shares deeply personal things. She shares deeply personal things, yet she appears somehow detached from them.*

'How is Dhaka treating you?', I ask next. 'Dhaka is expensive', she tells me. She also points out that the infrastructure of Dhaka has changed over the years. It was more open-planned before. Now it seems closed-off. 'There is more control', she says. But she makes do. It is hard to stay with family for too long, so Dhaka will have to do. 'How is your work going?', I ask. She tells me that it is going well. 'My workplace has a lot of queer people. I'm not friends with them, though. It's more of a hi-hello relationship, we don't hang out'. I ask her if she's dating anyone. 'Kind of', she says. Sraboni was using an app called Slowly *during COVID. The point of the app is to write letters on your phone to strangers and find pen pals all over the world. 'It really helped my mental health during the pandemic. I made many friends there.' Many friends and one potential girlfriend. She is also from Bangladesh, although not from Dhaka, and Sraboni is currently seeing her, taking things slow. The evening starts getting dark, we*

begin to wrap things up. Sraboni asks me if I'm looking at TikTok for my research. 'You'll find interesting queer content there', she says. I laugh and I say that I'll think about it, even though I'm too old to grasp TikTok. On that note we get ready to leave. We say our goodbyes and take-cares. We take the elevator and ride down. I go home but Sraboni goes back to work. She is not done yet.

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Sraboni's thoughts on her mother reinforce my belief that perhaps it is an ideological disconnect between their ideas of success that is causing the friction between them regarding Sraboni's future. Her mother has dissatisfactions about her life, Sraboni says. Perhaps she pushes Sraboni towards the good life that she herself never achieved. Or perhaps she too thinks that things would be easier if Sraboni leaves. It will certainly help her to avoid getting married. It will be reason enough to justify not getting married. Perhaps Sraboni's mother is also under the impression that there really are just these two options, and she pushes Sraboni towards both. As long as she decides. Sraboni's relationship with her brother intrigues me too, as it complicates patriarchy and homophobia for me. Her brother, she says, can be objectively misogynistic and homophobic. But he supports her. He balances his familial duties and love for his sister. He juxtaposes the two versions of himself.

Sraboni's mother wants her to decide. But Sraboni resists deciding. She resists, refuses cruel optimism. She looks at it from her characteristic detachment. She explores a new relationship in the meantime. Sraboni using the app *Slowly* to write letters to her potential girlfriend reminds me of Denise Tang's (2022) research on same-sex intimacies among older Chinese lesbian and bisexual women. Tang's participants talked about writing letters to their girlfriends. Longing and waiting were a part of their relationships. *Slowly* makes me wonder if the longing and waiting can transform across spaces and generations and take a digitised form. Sraboni's decision to stay, however, does not mean that she is hopeful – she feels hopelessness too. 'Dhaka is expensive', and 'There is more control'. But she embraces it, observes it, examines it. Sraboni chooses what Sara Ahmed calls queer pessimism – 'a pessimism *about* a certain kind of optimism, as a refusal to be optimistic about "the right things" in the right kind of way' (2010, p. 162). In the spirit of hope, I would propose that Sraboni's decision to stay is an act of radical hopelessness.

The words that recur in this chapter: future, utopia, aspiration, happiness. For my participants, they intertwine – but mostly in theory, seldom in practice. A happy queer future is hard to imagine, even harder to manifest into reality. The aspiration to reach such a future falls short in the friction between personal dreams of happiness, parental expectations of successful career and marriage, and national discourses on development and womanhood. My participants struggle to cope with cruelly optimistic future-templates. They remain in the impasse, they feel stuck. Sometimes, they choose to be queerly pessimistic and embrace radical hopelessness. Sara Ahmed reminds us that the Latin root of the word *aspiration* means 'to breathe' (2010, p. 120). The struggle for a bearable life, at the very least, is the struggle for queers to have a space to breathe. For my participants, such a breathing space is difficult to find – it is rarely within Bangladesh, it is often elsewhere; even if the elsewhere resides solely within the realm of the imagination. But what happens when one does, in fact, reach elsewhere? In this chapter, I have discussed the narratives of those who wish to leave, but do not. In the next chapter, I will discuss those who do leave, and everything that follows.

CHAPTER 4
WOMEN ON THE RUN: MUSINGS ON MOBILITY

I am searching for a good pair of pants. I never found a pair of pants that I just love. I like comfortable pants and clothes I can work in, that I feel comfortable in. I don't really like to get dressed up. I like to wear the same thing every day and feel comfortable. It's a fit, it's a certain kind of feeling, and if they're not right, which they never are, it's a sadness. You know, it interrupts the flow of happiness. I'm working on it, believe me.

— David Lynch, in an interview (2021)

This chapter revisits the words that emerged in the previous chapter: future, utopia, aspiration, happiness. There are certain elements that obstruct my Dhaka-dwelling participants from reaching their desired futures – the friction between personal aspirations, parental expectations, and broader discourses on success and happiness. This chapter asks: Do these elements move too when one moves across spaces? Does one manage to escape stuckedness, or does stuckedness travel as well? And when one moves in aspiration to find that elusive queer utopia, do they finally find it? I will migrate several of my previous theoretical touchstones here – the aspirations for envisioning a queer future, the disconnecting Venn diagram of women and queer, and the dissonance between generational understandings of women's empowerment – and build upon them as they travel across spaces. I will examine how they continue to affect the identities, kinship relations, and senses of belongingness of my participants. I will engage with the experiences of four of my participants – Zainab, Yasmin, Roshni, and K – to track the friction between expectations and realities in finding a queer future elsewhere.

I struggle to categorise the genre of movements that each of my participants go through. Yasmin is an international student who moved to Central Europe for higher studies. Zainab moved across many spaces and eventually reached Central Europe – on paper, it was to secure better employment; in reality, it was to reach the woman that she loves. Roshni and K, on the other hand, migrated when they were children, along with their families, to the USA and Canada respectively. Which is to say, neither of their movements

could be categorised as easily as *queer* migration, since their motivation to migrate was not built on aspirations to find a queer future elsewhere. However, such aspirations did emerge, as we will soon see. There are ample scholarship on queer migrations. I will rely on some such scholarship here. In Chapter 1, I discussed Decena (2008) and Aguila (2012), whose works explore the experiences of Peruvian and Dominican gay men, respectively, in the USA. I also discussed Bao (2013), who uses auto-ethnography to examine "Chineseness" as a queer diaspora in Australia. I will include the works of Quah and Tang (2022) and Usta and Ozbilgin (2022) to my inventory. Quah and Tang investigate Southeast Asian migration to several countries, including Australia, Canada, and the USA. Usta and Ozbilgin, on the other hand, investigate Turkish migration to the UK. Conversations around the mobility of Bangladeshi women can be located in a varied collection of contexts, such as agency and citizenship (Jahan 2011), matchmaking strategies and transnational marital networks (Sabur 2014), women's empowerment and the ethical fashion enterprise (Khan 2019), cross-border incarcerations (Mehta 2018), and women's travelogues from colonial Bengal (Harder 2020). Both of these strains of research will help guide my movements in this chapter.

Here, I consider mobility as, primarily, a physical and spatial phenomenon of movement, as opposed to the existential mobility that I referred to in the previous chapter. I also want to consider the various iterations of movement, the repetition and continuation of mobility – going back and forth, being on the move. I want to consider 'people on the move', as articulated by Avtar Brah; people who are part of a new phase of mass population movements, including 'labour migrants, highly-qualified specialists… the household members of previous migrants' (quoted in Griffin 2011, p. 735). My interest lies in the uncertainties that mobility contains, and the senses of belongingness or non-belongingness that emerge because of these uncertainties. I will refer to Doreen Massey's (1994) 'time-space compression' here, a phrase that comes up in her discussions on space, place, and postmodern times; a phrase that signifies the phase that Marx referred to as 'the annihilation of space by time' (p. 146). One of the results of this time-space compression, Massey says, is that it brings forth an increasing uncertainty about what we mean by 'places' and how we relate to them. Massey also points out that not all of us experience this time-space compression the same way, and there are certain factors that determine our degrees of mobility and influence our sense of space and place. Given that

time-space compression refers to 'movement and communication across space, to the geographical stretching-out of social relations, and to our experience of all this', it is not just time and space but money or capital that plays a crucial role in determining our understanding and experience of space (p. 147). The next determiners, according to Massey, are race and, inevitably, gender:

> The degree to which we can move between countries, or walk about the streets at night, or venture out of hotels in foreign cities, is not just influenced by 'capital'… women's mobility, for instance, is restricted – in a thousand different ways, from physical violence to being ogled at or made to feel quite simply 'out of place' – not by 'capital', but by men. (pp. 147-148)

Time-space compression, therefore, Massey iterates, needs to be differentiated socially. It is not just a moral or political point about equality, it is also a conceptual point, since, Massey adds, there is a power geometry to it. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this differentiated mobility, and the ways in which people are placed within this geometry are highly complicated and extremely varied. Mobility, and control over mobility, both, thus, reflect and reinforce power.

I want to explore how my participants are placed within this geometry of mobility. I wish to take into account the determiners that my participants carry – queer, Bangladeshi, women – and observe how the impact of these determiners translate transnationally. In the next sections, I will focus on my participants' narratives regarding their identities, kinship relations, future imaginaries, and senses of belongingness. I will inspect if stuckedness, and stuckedness-causes, stick to my participants as they move. I will insist that there is a certain mobility of stuckedness, and the causes that make my Bangladesh-based participants feel stuck do not dissipate with movement beyond Bangladesh – they merely mutate, and new causes emerge.

Travelling Troubles: The Many Voyages of Zainab

Zainab moved – from her hometown in a coastal city in Bangladesh to Dhaka, from there to one of the Arab countries in the Persian Gulf, and from there to Central Europe. All for the woman she loved. In the next few paragraphs, we will move with her. The next four segments are chronologically divided according to space and time, to map the trajectories

of the many voyages of Zainab. The segments are long, descriptive, and in Zainab's voice. Such is her story, it demands a meticulous retelling. Once we hear her story, we will discover how familiar troubles such as contested kinship relations travel with her, and new troubles such as financial crisis and cultural isolation emerge.

Hometown

I come from a very conservative family. A practising Muslim and *very conservative family where I also am the youngest kid. I have five siblings – two older brothers and two older sisters. So, it is not just my parents who are my guardians, they are my guardians too. The community that I come from, they have no understanding of anything other than the norm. And anything other than the norm in a sin. You are either mentally ill, or you have been possessed by a* djinn *(an evil spirit). When I was in high school, I fell in love with a girl. She was my friend, but, of course, it was more than just friendship. And it was one-sided. I was very naïve, and very driven with all my feelings. Not for a single time I ever thought that it was something unusual. But it put me in a lot of trouble.*

Me, as a lover, as a person who can love… I am very intense. I would give her gifts, I would write her letters. Be there for her, care for her, listen to her… three-sixty degrees, whatever was possible. It was very noticeable, in both families, especially mine. I did a lot of ultapalta kaajkormo *(strange activities). I ran away from home once. I left all alone – because I was angry, because she was ignoring me. I rode my bicycle along the coastline, for eighteen or nineteen kilometres. That was the first time when everyone freaked out. Like, why would she do that? That's when that friend of mine came into the limelight. Because she knows why. How come* she *knows why?*

What do they say in Western families? You are grounded? Basically, I was grounded throughout the end of class nine until the end of class ten. I went through a religious conversion therapy type of thing. I was not allowed to go anywhere. All my contacts were banned up until my SSC (Secondary School Certificate) exams. I was a very unsincere *student, and this was a new school that I enrolled in a year before. It was one of the best schools in the area, but I was new there, and I became very lonely. I developed a mental distance from studying. I still remember, my roll number became eighty-four in class, whereas in the previous school I was the first girl. And then, the incidents with my friend. My*

family cut all my connections with my friends. The way it happens in our country, your friends are thought to be the root cause of all your problems. You get influenced by the company you keep. They were blaming my friend for everything that I was expressing. They insisted that I was becoming like this because of my friend.

Also, the way it happens in our country, if you live with your family and you are the youngest, you don't have any personal space. I was around fourteen then, so forget any personal space, I hardly even belonged to myself, everyone else had a right on me. I used to write a diary – it was my refuge, I wrote it so that I could talk to myself. I wrote even the things that I could not express to that friend of mine that I was falling for. What happened was, my older brother read my diary. I felt betrayed. It was very traumatic. I felt ashamed and I burned all my diaries. Since then I never wrote a diary again.

The second thing that happened was, my mother kept a religious teacher at home. His task was to teach me panj surah – *five main* surahs *(chapters) in the Quran, like Al-Baqarah, Yaseen, Ar-Rahman… I forgot the other two, I never learned them. My task was to memorise them, so that they can have an effect on me and save me from bad influences. And then, praying five times a day. Also, all the time, continuously, counselling me, telling me that what I was going through was wrong and sinful. I started blaming myself. Correcting myself, purifying my thoughts and such. I started covering my head too. I didn't feel it from the inside, but I was in the purifying-my-soul mindset.*

What happened next was, I got really good grades in the SSC exams. I got GPA 5, after the roller-coaster ride of about nine months. Slowly, my parents started to notice that I was changing. The conversion therapy stopped. My "friendship" with that friend of mine lasted until a certain time. Then, you know, life goes on. Then I went off to university. That's where I met my partner.

We met at university, Afsana (pseudonym) and I. We were friends, we were roommates. We were really good as friends. We were good as roommates too, we had a good understanding. I asked her to be my roommate at the dormitory during one of the semesters. I used to pray in my room, and I wanted a roommate who would understand that. Afsana is not from Bangladesh, but she is from South Asia, and she is Muslim. She used to pray too. Over the semester we connected on a different level. I was opening up to her about my life, how I feel, who I am. I found someone who was not judging me for who I was. I was not open about it

(my sexuality), but she could see what it was. She also didn't have an understanding of what she eventually started feeling. It was a mutual exchange of friendship, mostly. And then we shared how we feel about each other (smiles). We realised that we feel strongly about each other, and it's different. That's how we started… dating. Dating sounds weird to me (laughs).

At the time, we didn't know where it will go, and how it will be possible. We only wanted to live in the moment, the present. We couldn't think any further than that. Neither of us come from financially strong families. We couldn't just go to some other country and make our life. We had to think about graduating, and finding jobs, and supporting our families. When reality check comes, love and other things become very unrealistic. So, after we graduated, she decided to go back to her country and start teaching at a school. I found a teaching opportunity at a school in Dhaka, so I moved there.

Dhaka

Dhaka was not planned, but I found a job there, so I moved. It was the first time I stayed away from family. Even though I studied at a residential university, it was close from my home, like a fifteen-minute ride on a rickshaw. Back home, my mother always tried to have a male guardian with me wherever I went. In Dhaka, after much searching, she found some cousin of hers who lived there with his family in the area where I was teaching. He found a place for me to rent which was within a five-minute walking distance from his house. Before moving back home, Afsana stayed there with me for a while. Even now, they know her. As a friend, of course (clears throat suggestively). In fact, everyone was relieved that I was living with a friend and not living alone as a woman. My family didn't give me a lot of liberty, you know. But of course, a lot of women don't even get that much.

Soon after I went to Dhaka, Afsana moved back to her home. A year later, she found a job opportunity in one of the Gulf countries. It was the most critical time in our relationship. Long-distance is not her thing. Also, she is the eldest daughter in her family, she has two younger siblings. She needed to accept the situation and weigh how much she could keep on her plate. She wanted to break up, there was no real or practical possibility for our relationship.

I wanted to give our relationship one more try. I put my heart and soul into going where she was. It was not easy. Their government had stopped giving the visa that I needed at the time. I was trying to find an opportunity, any opportunity. I just couldn't accept that I couldn't go there because of a visa issue. I was going through a tough time, emotionally. I realised that my performance in the classroom was not up to the mark anymore. From my ethical standpoint, I decided that I could not carry on like this. I quit my job. Soon after quitting the job, I got sick, and I went back home.

I told my mother that I don't want to stay here anymore. I told her that I want to look for jobs in one of the Gulf countries. Since Afsana is there, and she's my friend, a good friend, a family friend as well, I will have someone if I go there. I could stay with her, and I could look for jobs with a better pay. I had to convince my mother because for the visa that I needed to manage, I had to pay a good amount of money. I took that money from my mother. I convinced her that throughout school, college, and university, I was on full scholarship. Alhamdulillah *(praise be to God), there was no need to pay for my education. I had to show her that this could be an investment for me. I could return the money later on. I didn't even know what I was going to do after (laughs). But I was in survival mode. My mom agreed, and for that I will always be indebted to her. My brothers still blame my mother for letting me live out of the country, and without having got married still. Especially my older brother. It kind of breaks my heart, actually. He was an inspiring figure for me, in terms of studying, or aspirations in life. But slowly he became pissed at me for not doing things his way, or not choosing careers that he wanted me to choose. There are things that I had only achieved because of his guidance. But there's also this authority, this male ego that cannot be wiped out.*

The Persian Gulf

One of the reasons we wanted to get out of the Gulf was community. We wanted a community that we could live in. We only had two friends there that knew about us. We started to look for opportunities in other countries. At home I said that I wanted to find a better job. It's not that I lied, I really wanted a better job. I was always trying to find a better opportunity. Since my brothers were making a fuss about letting me go, I always had to prove myself. That is the problem. In Bangladesh, as a woman, you constantly need to prove that you are worthy

of that liberty. But the liberty became too expensive for me. I also had to send some money at home sometimes. So, I told them that I needed to pursue a higher degree to get better jobs, and for that I had to go abroad, be it Europe or America.

Central Europe

My partner found a program first in Central Europe. It took me longer, and the one I found had only a partial scholarship. My partner and I both financed the rest of it. We wanted to be together, so we both moved here. We wanted to settle down somewhere where we could at least breathe. Coming here didn't have much benefit because as a country it is not for queer people, and their laws are getting harder because of the current government. But after coming here we found a lot of friends. I'm really grateful for them, some of them are our chosen family as well. But it's harder now, emotionally. My emotional strength is drained completely. There's a lot of pressure from home now for me to come home and get married. Last week, my brother sent me a CV of a guy who lives in Germany and is established and all. And he took my CV from me. I asked my brother, why do you need my CV? He said, well, why does one need a CV? For jobs, of course. But he lied to me. It's a constant and continuous fight for me, and I'm burned out. We are zeroing on our savings too. But there's a good news. Afsana and I were trying to get married. When we moved from the Gulf, we also wanted to go to a country where we could legalise our relationship. Because if you don't, you cannot own things together. Here they don't allow two third-country nationals to get married. We came to know that Denmark has marriage tourism, they are one of the first countries who legalised same-sex marriage. We had applied. The application process was really hectic. When we were preparing the papers for the application, it felt like we were applying for asylum. So many documents, proof of relationship, whatnot. But we recently got the approval. It was one of the biggest milestones for us. Inshallah *(if God wills), we're getting married next month.*

I will let my discussion be chronological too, and focus on three different events in Zainab's life: her disclosure and her mother's role in it, her decision to move to Central Europe and remain there, and her marriage with her partner. An underlying theme in my discussion will be the relationship between Zainab and her mother, as it will enable me to

elaborate on an argument that I made in Chapter 3: that the idea of women's empowerment is different across generations, and there is an ideological disconnect between how my participants view it and how their mothers do. Furthermore, with the addition of the mother-daughter relationships of Roshni and K later in this chapter, I will show how this disconnect travels transnationally, and creates tensions between personal and parental ideas of ideal futures.

Zainab was found out. Not too different a scenario from Nusrat's exposure, in Chapter 2. The outcomes, clearly, were drastically different. While Nusrat was offered a tacit understanding, Zainab was made to go through 'a religious conversion therapy type of thing'. I believe that the traumatic experience of this distressing revelation is significant in determining the rest of Zainab's trajectory. I would like to focus not on the moment of revelation itself, but on its aftermath, and all that followed.

Zainab's mother arranged for a religious conversion therapy for her. Years later, she also, unknowingly, arranged money for the visa that would enable Zainab to reunite with her partner. Two acts that appear to be polar opposites. My intention is not at all to minimise, or justify in any form, the trauma of the conversation therapy that Zainab was put through. My intention is to investigate this seemingly contradictory behaviour on her mother's part, and speculate what may have cause it. Based on the information that I have on Zainab's family dynamic, I would propose that Zainab's mother's actions are a consequence of what Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) calls bargaining with patriarchy.

Patriarchal bargains, according to Kandiyoti, are strategies that women adopt 'within a set of concrete constrains' (p. 275). In any given society, she says, there exist different forms of patriarchy, and they all entail distinct 'rules of the game' (p. 274). Women bargain with patriarchy by adopting different strategies to maximise security and optimise life options. These strategies can entail specific forms of active or passive resistance that women display in the face of their oppression. Patriarchal bargains are crucial in shaping women's gendered subjectivity and determining their gender ideology in different contexts. And contexts are important here, Kandiyoti asserts. Patriarchal bargains have variations across class, caste, and ethnicity. They are also not timeless or immutable – they transform alongside moments in history, and open up new spaces for renegotiations. Kandiyoti adds that the term 'bargain' denotes a deal between more or less equal

participants. In the case of patriarchal bargains, however, the exchange is asymmetrical. 'Women, as a rule, bargain from a weaker position', making patriarchal bargains always a difficult compromise (p. 286).

While it may appear that Zainab's mother enforcing religious conversion therapy on Zainab stems from homophobia, I argue that it is more so a reflection of her mother's gender subjectivity and gender ideology shaped by her bargains with patriarchy. Moreover, Zainab is aware of that. The incident of Zainab's disclosure took place soon before her SSC examinations, and the conversion therapy lasted until her SSC examinations. The conversion therapy ended once she received her results – 'really good grades', GPA 5. My speculation is that Zainab's mother's fears about her "friendship" is not as much about her homosexuality (her "friendship" did resume afterwards, and lasted until university) as it is about the possibility of her having failed her exams. Zainab was already isolated in her new school, and her grades were declining (the roll number Zainab speaks of is related to the merit list; she was 'the first girl' in her previous school, in the new school she was eighty-fourth). And then she began her *ultapalta kaajkormo*, her self-proclaimed strange activities. Had Zainab done badly in her exams, it would have had two consequences: firstly, it would have obstructed Zainab from having a financially secure future (Zainab repeatedly tells us that she does not come from a financially strong family), and secondly, it would have demonstrated that Zainab's mother had failed as a parent. My understanding is that the vigilance she exercised in controlling Zainab's activities and ensuring her safety (or what she presumed would ensure her safety) – including that of constantly having her movements monitored by a male guardian – is a result of her attempting to prove that the power she held over the decision-making in the family had been appropriately practiced and not been misused.

I notice tension between Zainab's mother and Zainab's brother regarding decision-making about Zainab's life. And Zainab's brother is far more intrusive in this instance. There are larger oppressive structures within Zainab's family that restrict her movements: the lack of personal space and privacy, the authority of too many guardians (including all her older siblings), and the surveillance of male guardians appointed to accompany her everywhere. In addition to all this, Zainab's brother reads her diary. An act of betrayal. And not his only betrayal – he betrays her again years later by obtaining her CV under false pretences. I asked Zainab in a follow-up phone call what her father's

role was within their family dynamic – in the initial interview she rarely mentioned him. She informed me that her father was much less involved in the decision-making concerning the children's lives, particularly about their education and their subsequent marriages. The 'burden' of raising the children, Zainab told me, fell largely on her mother. She added that she recalls her mother as a strong woman, a working woman, a decision-making woman. Which is why, I suppose, she is quick to judge her brother's actions, but not her mother's. She notices her brother's display of 'authority' and 'male ego', she remains sure that it 'cannot be wiped out'.

The notion of liberty being conditional for women in Bangladesh comes up several times in my conversation with Zainab. Liberty is rarely given to women. And it is a thing to be given – women must earn it, they cannot merely claim it as theirs. Even earning the liberty is not enough, one needs to continually prove that they are worthy of it. The bargaining continues. Zainab, a 'full scholarship' student, demonstrates that her migration could be an investment. Zainab's mother finances her travel to the Gulf. In exchange of her trust in her daughter's decision to leave ('and without having got married still'), she continues to be blamed by Zainab's brothers. In exchange of the liberty of being allowed to leave, Zainab feels obligated to send money home – a display of her worthiness.

Zainab did not move to find a queer utopia, she moved for love. But now she chooses to stay. 'My target is to find work outside of Bangladesh', she said, 'I cannot go back and live there. Yes, I go and visit my family, but my family does not know who I am and how I live my life'. To achieve an understanding of Turkish migration to the UK, Dilvin Dilara Usta and Mustafa F. Ozbilgin (2022) created four archetypes that illustrate how sexuality informs migrants' decisions to migrate: dreamers, climbers, escapists, and seekers. Based on empirical data from interviewing migrants, they propose that the desire to migrate from one context to another is influenced by a 'toxic triangle' – a combination of sexuality, space, and security (p. 2). When one's home country contains 'hostile structures and cultures against freedom of sexuality', it can present a 'danger space' for them, and threaten their security (p. 2). This toxic triangle motivates one to migrate to a better place. Sexually marginalised people, in this research, are categorised under the archetypes of escapists and seekers – the escapists seek a safe space to express their authentic sexuality and envision the possibility of having a more fulfilling life; the seekers pursue essential security and space for their presence and strive to find opportunities that can transform

their lives. Once having reached Central Europe, Zainab realised that she found traces of what she sought – a reunion with her partner, the possibility of having their union legalised. But she could not escape what threatened her sense of security at home – intrusion from her family, pressures to get married. Furthermore, new precarities emerged, such as homophobia paired with racism, job insecurity due to strict immigration laws, cultural isolation, and mental health issues.

If bargaining with patriarchy was the key to surviving in Bangladesh, bargaining with White privilege became the alternative in Central Europe. Quah Ee Ling Sharon and Shawna Tang (2022) speak of such bargains. Based on both autobiographical data and qualitative data from interviews, they reflect upon the migration trajectories of queer migrants who have emigrated from Southeast Asian countries to Australia, Canada, the USA, the UK, New Zealand, and Singapore. All the migrants in this study have 'moved "West"' – which essentially means that they moved to wealthier countries that are perceived to be relatively more accepting of gender and sexual non-normativity compared to their countries of origin (p. 34). The migrants deemed these countries to be more progressive based on indexes such as legalisation of same-sex marriage. Driven by the aspiration to live the good life, they hoped to finally 'find freedom and a happy ending' (p. 34). However, soon it was evident that their lived experiences did not correspond to the 'straightforward, developmental, linear and formulaic "things will get better" narrative' (p. 34). Quah and Tang invoke José Esteban Muñoz and Lauren Berlant here. They moved West in hopes to find Muñoz's 'queer utopia' – a rejection of the 'here and now', an acceptance of the 'there and then' (quoted in Quah and Tang, p. 35). Instead, they were faced with Berlant's 'slow death' – 'a condition of being worn out by the activity of producing life' (quoted in Quah and Tang, p. 38). They had made a 'trade-off' – in exchange for privileges such as 'marriage equality and a generally more queer-hospitable environment', they encountered other forms of marginalisation (p. 40).

Zainab found traces of the good life after multiple migrations – she found a queer community, she found the opportunity to pursue options to legalise her partnership. But new troubles emerged, such as racism paired with homophobia. They manifested not just as microaggressions, but in more institutionalised forms, and Zainab experienced job precarity and financial crisis as a result. In the follow-up phone call in January 2024, she informed me that she was laid off from her job, on unclear grounds, alongside another

Asian colleague. Immigration laws have become more strict, she told me – it is easy to lose a job now, and harder to find a new one. As a consequence of having lost her job, Zainab faced complications with visa renewal as well – she has filed her paperwork and is awaiting a response. This is where Berlant's slow death manifests in Zainab's life, as it does in the lives of Quah and Tang and their participants. In the process of producing life in the new home – keeping jobs, maintaining visas, finding better employment – Zainab feels worn out. She also feels isolated. Belonging to a queer community means excluding herself from migrant Bangladeshi communities (I have discussed this in Chapter 2). In addition to all this, she feels saddened that she cannot share her grief with her family back in Bangladesh. Tang and Quah speak of this too, of the 'entangled and complicated intimacies with family back home' (p. 42). Family puts Zainab in a difficult position – on the one hand she is close with her family and is involved in familial matters; on the other hand, she is not able to share her life and its ups and downs with them. All of these reasons combined affects Zainab's mental health.

But there's a good news – they did get married, Zainab and Afsana. I saw their beautiful wedding photos on Zainab's Instagram (the private one, where she added me after being sure that it was safe). It made me happy to see them – in love, married. Reading Sara Ahmed (2010), and knowing how marriage can be an oppressive social imposition as a normative life trajectory, I am suspicious of marriage. We know of the unwanted marriage pressures that almost all of my participants routinely face, we are aware of how contested a life choice it can be for queer Bangladeshi women. Ahmed is not uncritical of homonormativity, but she also reminds us that 'the desire to stay close to the scenes of the normative is not simply about the desire for the good life, as a form of assimilation, but is also shaped by histories of struggle for a bearable life' (p. 255). And a bearable life is all that Zainab seeks. She has moved again and again to find it – she comes close to it, but it keeps slipping away. Zainab's marriage *feels* different. Perhaps because it was desired, perhaps because it united two people who crossed all borders (geographical and otherwise) to be with each other, perhaps because it made us believe that a happy queer future is possible after all.

It would make us all happy if Zainab's happy future persists. However, her happy future gets interrupted, time and again, by travelling troubles. The old troubles do not disappear – they mutate and add to the new ones. Her brother asks for her CV and sends it to 'a guy

who lives in Germany and is established and all'. I am reminded of Seuty Sabur (2014) here. In her work on matchmaking strategies and transnational marital networks, she discusses matrimonial biodata that resemble CVs. These CVs are 'highly mobile' and they travel via emails and websites, 'transcending spatial boundaries, responding to expanding and globalised marriage markets, and connecting the Bangladeshi middle class across the globe' (p. 597). I am reminded of Hans Harder (2020) here as well. Harder traced women's travel narratives from colonial Bengal during the second half of nineteenth century, specifically from the 1860s onwards. He wanted to discover how travelogues thrived in an environment that 'stereotypically perceived the situation of women in terms of confinement, restricted mobility, and blocked vision' (p. 1). An intriguing observation that Harder made is how male accompaniment was implied in the writings. The authors of these travelogues used an omnipresent 'we' in the descriptions, often referring to husbands, fathers, and relatives. Their companionships, on the whole, were downplayed, but present nonetheless. The spectral presence of Zainab's brother follows her to Central Europe. He presses Zainab to get married. Even though Zainab is already married. 'How does it feel when you know that you're getting married but your family won't know', I asked her during the initial interview. She struggled to reply. She feels emotions that she does not, cannot, reconcile: 'I don't deal, I avoid (laughs). Avoidance technique, that's what my counsellor said'. If you cannot share queer grief with your family, you cannot share queer happiness either.

'Now what?', I ask Zainab. She does not know, she says. She is waiting for an update on her visa situation. She is exploring other options, other countries. There is not enough guidance, so information is hard to come by. Information based on lived experience, that is. In their depths of despair, Zainab and Afsana even considered applying for asylum once. But one cannot go back home when one applies for asylum. What if there is an emergency? 'I am afraid to close the door forever', Zainab tells me. She ruminates on going back to Bangladesh (perhaps Dhaka, certainly not her hometown), but finds no confidence in that decision. She considers moving again. Where to? *Maybe Canada.*

Identities: Moving, Fleeting, Emerging

At this point, I would like to direct my attention towards Yasmin, Roshni, and K, and observe how the geometry of mobility affects their understanding of their identities. Yasmin, an international student also based in Central Europe, pointed out to me that identities can travel, emerge, and become heavy. I mentioned this in Chapter 2 – Yasmin notices her gender and sexual identities to fluctuate based on her physical and geographical location. She adds that an array of other identities emerge too:

> After coming here, I realised oh, I'm Brown, I'm a person of colour. All these political identities started to climb onto these other identities I already had back home. Like, being middle-class, being a woman in Dhaka – they were already there. Then more identities started adding to that, and it just started to become heavy. And it's all political. There's no way of being, like, I don't care. I have to be aware of how people are treating me by putting me into these labels, and how they perceive me through these particular lenses. And playing that 'oh, I'm a third-world country national', that became super heavy for me.

I recall Yasmin's comment (from Chapter 2) on microaggressions here, and how they can feel quite macro. Yasmin does not enjoy carrying the heaviness of all her emerging identities. But she in unable to shed them – to not care is to deny their political significance. The discomfort that Yasmin feels about performing her queer identity (also from Chapter 2), she feels about performing her 'third-world country national' identity too. The exhaustion she feels about carrying these heavy emerging identities is familiar to me. Like Yasmin, I also realised after coming to Australia for my PhD that I am Brown, that I am a person of colour, that I am a 'third-world country national'. Shiva Chandra (2021) speaks of realising being Brown in academia. Once he came to Australia to do his PhD on the relationships and identities of South Asian gay men, he experienced – in conferences, conversations, and journal article reviews – an expectation from him to 'continually discuss "culture" or "ethnicity"' in a way that is not expected of those researching Anglo contexts (p. 2). Chandra feels frustrated, I feel the same.

While in Central Europe, Yasmin's racial and national identity becomes the highlight. While in Dhaka, her identity as a woman becomes more important. It is a womanhood that is 'more like a negotiation', and it is not static. Yasmin was a different kind of woman

across different areas of Dhaka: 'I was one kind of woman in Mohammadpur, another kind in Dhanmondi, and another kind in Gulshan' (the residents of these areas vary socio-economically). Which is not to say that her woman-ness was a unified notion of woman-ness: 'It happened a couple of times that, when I would wear like a baggy pant or a shirt, random kids going somewhere in their cars would roll down their windows and be like *byata na maiya?* (Man or woman?) I would be like, why do you care? I'm just walking, let me walk (laughs)'. After having moved, Yasmin does not feel restricted to that title anymore. 'Here, there's a different way of perceiving femininity or femme bodies', and wearing a baggy pant or a shirt does not take away her femininity here. With the woman-question answered, she finds the chance to focus on her queer self instead. It is almost as if Yasmin changes her identities as she moves between places. Like changing clothes. Bao (2012) mentions this, as he renegotiates his own "Chineseness" as a queer diaspora in Australia. He says, in reference to Elspeth Probyn (1996), that identities are constructed by different discourses. People embody, live, and negotiate their identities. As unstable as identities are, people also often live outside them. Yasmin's reflections on her various identities is a testament to that.

For Roshni, the main conflict proves to be between her sexual identity and her ethnic identity. Roshni was born in Dhaka, and she migrated to the USA when she was two years old. 'My dad went to school in the US', she clarified, 'At first my parents were thinking that it would be more like a visit, it would be an opportunity for my sister and I to learn English'. Later on, her parents decided that there may be more opportunities in the USA, particularly regarding education, compared to Bangladesh. They decided to stay, and Roshni grew up there. Once she began to come to terms with her queer identity, she felt that it was in contrast with her ethnic identity:

> It almost feels like my sexual orientation directly clashes with my ethnic or racial identity. Queerness allows me to be extremely fluid, to think outside the box, to question heteronormativity and what is considered normal. Whereas, my ethnic culture is more so about what *is* the box, what makes you Bangladeshi, what makes you part of that culture. So, some of my fluidity clashes with that I know of what it means to be Bangladeshi.

Roshni's understanding of being a Bangladeshi originates from the teachings she has acquired from her family, and the Bangladeshi community that she has come across in the USA. 'My parents taught me what it means to be successful, and to strive for success. They instilled this idea in me and my sister that we have to show the most perfect versions of ourselves. I love the fact that I'm queer, but I know that that's an imperfection in their eyes'. It discourages Roshni that success and being successful, as seen by her parents, do not accommodate being queer. We already know from Chapter 2 that Roshni is apprehensive of the Bangladeshi community that her mother is an active part of. She does not feel comfortable around 'comments and ideology' that she encounters at their events, and distances herself from that. She distances herself because she feels that the fluidity of her queerness gets obstructed by the rigidity of Bangladeshi diaspora practices.

There is also a lack of conversations and resources that could familiarise Roshni with Bangladeshi queer culture. I have already established in Chapter 2 that queer popular culture is largely invisible and inaccessible, for women both within and outside Bangladesh. Roshni has never been in contact with queer communities in Bangladesh, nor does she have any knowledge of Bangladeshi queer culture. She tried 'testing the waters' by asking her parents if they 'had any gay friends' back in Bangladesh: 'My mom was like, there aren't any gay people in Bangladesh (laughs). We talked to my dad about it afterwards, and he was like, there are gay people in Bangladesh, what are you saying (laughs)'. Roshni's mother's lack of understanding, or perhaps denial, about the existence of Bangladeshi queer people affects Roshni in more personal ways too, we will soon learn of it.

K, too, senses a clash between their gender and sexual identities and their ethnic identity. However, for them, this clash is relational to their migration experience. And K's migration route is multiple, generational, and laden with trauma. At the age of ten, K was taken to the USA by her father, along with his new family. K's parents were divorced, and their mother stayed behind. The first migration brought forth a separation from their mother: 'My migration story was scary, because I was so little, and I wanted to be with my mom. Adults really don't like to talk to their children, especially Bangladeshi adults. They think that kids don't understand anything. But the impact was huge'. K was taken to two different states in the USA – both of which they disliked and felt disoriented in. They wanted to go back, and be reunited with their mother. K's paternal grandmother passed

away while they were in the USA, and they were brought back to Bangladesh. Afterwards, K's father migrated back to Bangladesh, and K was sent to Canada to be with their cousin. 'The information is murky here', K alerted me, 'I was a kid, and no one told me anything, and I was being dragged from one place to another'. K's family dispersed soon after. Their father remained in Bangladesh with his new family, their siblings moved to the USA again, and they landed in Canada. 'That was the last time I saw my father, in Bangladesh, 21 years ago', K said, 'My mom came and met me in Canada, and we have been living here ever since'.

We know from Chapter 2 that K feels constantly conflicted between their Bangladeshi and Canadian identities. This conflict, at the very root, is shaped by their migration story, and their father's desire to move West:

> My dad was obsessed with Whiteness. My brother's name is Kevin, my sister's name is Kristen, and my name is Katherine. He was obsessed with Whiteness even when we were born. He was getting us all ready to come to the West. When he was present, we had to eat with cutlery, we couldn't eat with our hands. We could only speak English in front of him and he would correct our pronunciations. We didn't have an accent when we came here.

Being so young and being 'so pushed towards Whiteness' created a crisis for K: at home they were called 'too White' and 'too Canadian' (and, therefore, not Bangladeshi enough) by their mother, outside they felt like a Brown immigrant. In the clash between these two identities, their queerness suffered.

I wonder if Roshni's parents' idea of success and perfection, and K's father's desire to be close to whiteness, stem from similar ideologies. Sara Ahmed (2010) tells us that there are some social forms that are already attributed to being happiness-causes, such as 'the family, marriage, class mobility, whiteness' (p. 112). Additionally, Quah and Tang (2022) tell us that queer migrant subjects are not alone in their fantasies for a 'good' life, and migrants in general tend to feel a pressure to strive to become 'a "good" migrant subject' (pp. 41, 44). Perhaps Roshni's parents strive to perform perfection, and encourage their children to do the same, not only because it ensures them a place of respect within the community but also because it demonstrates that they have established themselves as good migrant subjects. It becomes a visible evidence that in the 'trade-off' of migration,

they have gained more than they have lost. Perhaps K's father was under the impression that proximity to Whiteness will yield the privileges of Whiteness as well, and in turn assist him in achieving upward mobility. In each case, however, the parents' roadmap of success and happiness have proved to oppose their children's perception of it. In the case of both Roshni and K, conflicts such as these, particularly within the context of migration, deeply affected their relationship with their mothers.

Migration and Mothers

I would now like to revisit my argument from Chapter 3 about the intergenerational disconnect between ideologies of women's empowerment, and build on it with the added variable of migration. I will focus on Roshni and K's mother-daughter relationships, and inspect how their ideological tensions have travelled transnationally, affecting each of their visions of a good life and a good future.

We know that only two people in Roshni's family know of her sexuality – her sister, and her father. We also know that her father encouraged her to keep her sexuality a secret from everyone in their extended family, including her mother. We have unpacked Roshni's disclosure to her father in Chapter 2. He advised his daughter that should she choose to pursue the trajectory that her queerness brings her, she should be 'absolutely exceptional' (an extension of the performance of perfection) so as to be immune from gossip and scandal. Her mother, on the other hand, prioritises how their family is perceived in the Bangladeshi community, and claims that 'there aren't any gay people in Bangladesh'.

While Roshni remains stuck between her secrecy and her mother's denial, Roshni's mother begins to invest herself in the idea of getting her daughter married. We are aware that Roshni's parents envision a future for her that includes marriage and children. Her mother now turns her thoughts into actions: 'She's creating my biodata and sending it out, she's telling me that I should meet this person or that person'. This puts Roshni in a difficult position. On the one hand, she empathises with her mother, and knows that she leans on her emotionally. On the other hand, she is expected to provide emotional labour for her mother while having to accept that her mother may never understand her:

> I definitely feel that she wants someone to talk to, and someone to understand her, hold space with her, and hold her emotions. That's not something that she has ever really gotten in her life. And she has definitely experienced a lot of trauma that keeps coming back up in stories that she tells. She should really go to therapy, but she's using my sister and I to kind of process a lot of those emotions. I think that's another way that caretaking has shown up with my mom in particular – now I'm at an age where I can take care of her, and I think she definitely needs the emotional support.

We did not discuss the trauma of Roshni's mother. I cannot speculate what it stems from, which particular patriarchal bargains. Roshni's mother expects Roshni to invest her emotional labour to accommodate her trauma. Roshni respects her mother's trauma, but also realises that to prioritise her mother's happiness would mean to minimise her own.

In the meantime, Roshni's emotional caretaking of her mother begins to jeopardise her current relationship. 'I'm extremely happy in this relationship, it's honestly one of the best relationships I've ever had in my life', Roshni tells me. She is dating someone who was assigned female at birth but is now non-binary. What makes Roshni worried is that her family is being a cause of frustration for her partner: 'Something in particular that we've had really hard conversations about is me referring to them as "my friend". I don't think they fully understand that everybody's gonna be my friend until we're married'. Roshni's partner is of East Asian descent. They went through a conversion therapy when they had first come out to their parents, and therefore have their own history of trauma. 'In a sense, when I'm in spaces with my parents, I am inadvertently pushing them back in the closet with me' Roshni says. Roshni's parents want permanence for Roshni's future – marriage is permanent, friendship is fleeting. But Roshni struggles to imagine what marriage could look like for her and her partner: 'So much of what we wear and what we do in weddings is extremely gendered. What would it mean if we have a same gendered couple getting married? How well would my partner be received in those spaces? Because, they're not gonna look the part or dress the part. My family's gonna be very confused'.

Roshni's internal clash between being Bangladeshi and being queer re-emerges in her vision of a queer future. It is not just the spectacle of a probable wedding that worries

Roshni, it is her hope for her future in general, a future that she hopes will fulfil everything that she did not receive from her own family:

> I know that I want family. And I want a family that will love unconditionally. I don't think that's something I got growing up, there were always conditions. It's like, something needed to happen in order for me to feel like I was accepted or that I was enough. I imagine having a family – with a partner, with kids, and being in a queer community. I don't want to raise a child by myself, I don't want it to be just me and my partner. I want to have people around me – my partner, my best friend, their best friend. A whole community, already built in. I envision community, acceptance, happiness in general.

Roshni paints a beautiful picture – community, acceptance, *happiness in general*. But particular conflicts between her mother's desires and hers make her question if such a happiness would really be achievable. Her mother wants marriage and children for her, she wants success and perfection. In a way, she wants happiness for Roshni. But Roshni's and her mother's idea of happiness-objects are vastly different. Roshni's version of happiness does not exist for her mother. Her mother's version of happiness is an obstacle to Roshni's happiness which she does not know how to overcome. For Roshni, to honour her mother's dream for her would be to abandon her own dream for herself.

K's relationship with their mother is far more complex – K informs me of this at the very beginning: 'Me and my mom have an attachment – like, not healthy – that she and I grew into because when I was little, my dad left, and she had a lot of emotional things that she relied on me to solve'. K's emotional caretaking of their mother started quite early in their life, intensified particularly by the social stigma of divorce. Once reunited with their mother in Canada, they hoped for a new beginning. Their household at the time consisted of K, their mother, and their cousin (*khalato bon* – K's mother's sister's daughter). In the beginning, K had an intimate relationship with their mother, even though there were insecurities caused by external reasons in most of their early years. 'We lived under the poverty line most of my life', K told me, 'There was a lot of financial insecurity, food insecurity, and systemic things that you can't do anything about'. As a result, K's mother worked multiple jobs, as did K once they grew older.

One particular incident changed the dynamic of K and their mother's relationship:

> I was talking to this Bengali guy in high school, when I was sixteen. One night, he came over. My cousin was there too, she was in university at that point. The three of us sat on the couch – my cousin was in the middle – and we watched a movie (laughs). When the movie ended, he went about his way, and I stayed home. My cousin turned to me and said, don't say anything to your mom, or she's gonna freak out. I was like, that's weird, I tell her everything. The next day, my mother came home from her overnight shift, and she was *pissed*. Apparently, this guy's mom called her and said, *amar chhele bhalo na* (my son is not a good boy), your daughter shouldn't hang out with him, he sells drugs and he has a condom in his wallet (laughs). I told her that there were three of us, we watched a movie, and then he went home. Apparently, he was out all night, and he told his mother that he was out all night with me. I thought, it's my mom, we're so close, there's no way she's gonna believe this *auntie*, this stranger over me. But she did not believe me. You're gonna come home pregnant, she said. From that point on, we were not okay.

Founded on a mutual sense of betrayal, this incident affected the closeness of their relationship. K's mother began to be increasingly suspicious of K. K started avoiding her by not coming home and frequently staying over at a friend's house. That, in turn, made their mother all the more suspicious of them. In the long run, it created an irreparable rift in their relationship: 'We were mutually putting each other through hell'.

What made K's mother react in such a way? Did her reaction emerge from a concern about judgement and gossip? Or did it emerge from a concern about honour? Rimple Mehta (2018) argues that social borders are created by norms of honour, and the concept of honour – especially women's honour – carry great significance at the level of 'the family, the village, and the community as well as the state' (p. 25). Mehta's context is cross-border incarcerations of Bangladeshi women in India. By collecting the narratives of forty-two incarcerated women in two correctional homes in Kolkata, she explores how these women perceive their everyday realities and negotiate them within the social hierarchies of power and gender. One of her interests lies in exploring how traditional norms of honour travel with these women as they become incarcerated after crossing borders. And there are two borders that they cross – a political border, and a social border. Was K's mother worried that K had transgressed a social border, after having migrated across a political border? Or did her anxiety stem from the fear of having failed as a parent, and as

a single parent in this instance? She made sacrifices to grasp the possibility of a good future in Canada. She was making sacrifices in Canada to produce life, and constantly combat financial precarity. Was she worried that all her sacrifices would be rendered futile if K chooses the wrong life trajectory? 'He sells drugs and he has a condom in his wallet', the *auntie* told her; 'You will come home pregnant', she told K. Neither K's mother nor K could achieve happiness if drugs and unwanted pregnancies become obstacles in their path. K's mother's anxiety is similar to Zainab's mother's regarding Zainab's "friendship". Perhaps they were less alarmed about the gender or sexual identity of the people their daughters were engaging with and more alarmed that they existed at all. Like Zainab, K also does not blame their mother: 'She did her best, in the context and the situation that she was in. I'm finally at a place where I can say that. It's still hurtful, but I don't want her to come off as a villain. She's complicated, she's human'.

After having navigated their tangled relationship with their mother through therapy, K still finds themselves stuck in an uncomfortable spot. On the one hand, they are responsible for their mother: 'I'm responsible for her care, because I'm the only biological family here'. On the other hand, due to unresolved past tension in their relationship, there are 'mental health things' associated with that role. Furthermore, K cannot explain themselves to their mother – their queer and non-binary identity, their polyamorous marriage. K was raised as a cisgender woman, K is still expected to be – particularly to their mother – a cisgender woman. K's mother's expectations of them are similar to the expectations the rest of my participants' mothers' have of their daughters: marriage and children.

K's inability to explain themselves to their mother reminds me of the TV show *Sort Of* (2021). When I interviewed K, they said that they were looking forward to watching it – I do not know if they did. When I watched it, a particular scene in episode four of season one reminded me of K. Sabi Mehboob, the protagonist, is the child of Pakistani immigrants in Canada. They are non-binary, and they work as a caregiver to a couple's young children by day, and as a bartender by night. Like K, Sabi has a tense relationship with their mother regarding their appearance (we remember, from Chapter 2, the anecdote where K's mother saw them and thought that they were 'some guy' sitting in the car) and their choice of profession.

Figure 4.1 Sabi talking to their mother, scene from *Sort Of* (2021)

Sabi's mother picks them up one day from their caregiving job. Once Sabi gets in the car, she says, 'You wear makeup and bangles and care for children. If you're not a girl, what are you? Gender binary?' Sabi's mother looks very proud to have said 'gender binary'. Sabi chuckles. 'Did you look that up?', they ask. Sabi's mother replies, 'I have to understand everything if I'm going to accept it'. K, of course, does not experience any such exchanges with their mother – they do not even picture the possibility of it.

K's mother, similar to Roshni's mother, believes that marriage and children are the key to a happy future. While K is married, they do not have children. K and her partner do want children, but K's relationship with their mother makes K hesitant. 'What she said to me the other day was hilarious', they shared another anecdote:

> I went to her place, I was helping her with something. She asked me, what is your partner doing? I told her that he had a therapy session. Then she asked me, does your therapist ever tell you that everything will get better if you have a child? I thought, I would not pay her if she said that to me (laughs). But I asked, mom, what gets better if you have a child? She said, you know, everything, all the issues that you're having. If you have a child, it will give you direction in life, it will give you a purpose in life. You don't have it yet, that's why you need to go to a therapist.

K's mother is firm in her belief that against all odds, a child will be an infallible happiness-cause. It will ensure K a direction in life, a purpose in life, and things *will* get better. Neither Roshni nor K, thus, escape their mothers' fantasy of a good life, and a good future. Their mothers believe that there is a prescription for achieving it – success and perfection, husband and children. The weight of their mothers' fantasies travel across space and generation, and lay heavy on their own dreams of queer happiness.

The Fading Homeland

Ironically, while unhappiness-causes from the homeland follow my mobile and diaspora participants, the homeland itself begins to fade away. Roshni tells me how her connection to Bangladesh gradually diminishes: 'We used to go back more frequently when I was a kid. I remember taking a month off school or going there for winter break. Just to spend time in Bangladesh and meet family'. The frequency of those travels, however, became lower and lower with time. 'I actually haven't been back since the seventh grade, which is probably over ten years by now'. Roshni has relatives in Bangladesh, she tells me. 'Most of my mom's side is still there, most of my dad's side emigrated to the US'. Over the years, she has lost several family members who live in Bangladesh. Places are made of the people who inhabit them. As family members pass away, Roshni's connection to her homeland becomes weaker. 'We're losing some connection to Bangladesh', she acknowledges, 'It's making it harder to go back because the people that we would see and stay with are no longer there'.

K experiences a similar disconnect with Dhaka. While they migrated at a young age, they did return several times. The city, however, became less and less familiar after each visit. K recollected their fading memories of Dhaka to me:

> You know, the more I went, the more I didn't recognise it. The first time I went was five or six years after being here. I didn't recognise the city's landscape, I didn't recognise the sounds. I didn't recognise my cousins, because they were so much older. I didn't recognise any of it. It was kind of sad. But I also felt very rooted. It was hard, though. Apparently, I gave it away that I'm a foreigner just by the way I walked, just by the way I made eye contact with people. There were all these cultural things that gave away that I was not from there, and it made me feel very

> scared and insecure. Like I couldn't go explore the city on my own. I had no friends there. I was a child of divorced parents, so none of the kids ever wanted to be friends with me. Their parents told them that you can't be friends with this person, because of their family. My cousins, they have their lives, and I'm just dropping in on vacation. I had all this time, but they had things to do, they couldn't be my tour guide all day (laughs). So, there was a lot of sitting at home. The food was the only thing that was like, I know this! That was it. Since I left Bangladesh, I have been there a handful of times, maybe five times. And it's been twenty-one years. There's also a lot of money-related things. My mom and I have never ever gone together. I was working and taking care of finances while she was gone. Then it would take like five years to put all the money back to go to Bangladesh. Then I would go, and same deal.

K feels like a stranger in their homeland. The landscape, the sounds, the people – they all become more and more unrecognisable. The city also refuses to recognise them, it sees them as a foreigner. K's movement, K's eye contact – the city considers K's embodiment of their identity itself to be out of place. We know, from Chapter 3, how the women in Dhaka sense the city becoming increasingly hostile towards them, how they feel constantly monitored there but never seen. K feels the same way – 'scared and insecure', not welcome to explore the city on their own. People and landscape both gradually become distant; food remains as the only familiar reference point.

K comes back home, but they do not *feel* at home. Both the spatial distance between Canada and Bangladesh and the temporal distance between each trip impedes K's sense of belongingness in their homeland. Massey's (1994) time-space compression affects K's experience of Dhaka. Capital plays a crucial role too. K's capacity to explore and experience Dhaka depends largely on the arrangement of money. Time, space, and capital combined dictates K's homecoming. Yaakov Perry (2000) talks about the contradiction of homecoming. As he explores the reconstruction of home in queer life-narratives by reading autobiographical texts about homecoming, he discusses his own feelings about going home, and leaving it behind. 'Paradoxically', he says, 'I have always felt at home only when leaving it. From an anxious distance, the airplane engines roaring, familiar dislikes that feel inevitable are gradually displaced, made foreign' (p. 214). K's homecoming

reflects such a paradox too – both K and Dhaka observe each other from an anxious distance, appearing progressively foreign to each other. I felt a similar contradiction of homecoming too, upon returning to Dhaka. But I must wait until the next chapter to share it.

My Dhaka-dwelling participants want to leave because they struggle to cope with the conflict between personal desires, parental expectations, and unaccommodating national discourses. Cruelly-optimistic future-templates of happiness exhaust them, the Venn diagram of being Bangladeshi women and being *queer* Bangladeshi women exasperates them. They feel stuck, they wish to leave. My mobile and diaspora participants experience a similar crisis. The stuckedness-causes of my Dhaka-dwelling participants travel transnationally – often carried forward and passed down across generations. They affect their identities, kinship relations, future imaginaries, and senses of belongingness. Moreover, new stuckedness-causes emerge, and new versions of cruelly-optimistic future templates appear – bargaining with White privilege, for example, and being 'good' migrant subjects. My participants in the diaspora bear the burden of home-grown travelling troubles, while sensing the homeland itself fading away. My participants on the move keep moving, perpetually in search for a place to belong, perpetually in hope – and I invoke Berlant again – 'that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing' will become different in *just the right way* (2011, p. 2). But the good life remains elsewhere, the good queer life too. The chase continues. Like David Lynch, and his search for the right pair of pants – an embodied comfort. When it fits, it feels right; when it does not fit, it gives rise to sadness, it interrupts the flow of happiness. My participants keep searching – for an embodied comfort, for an assurance that they *finally* belong. But their flow of happiness gets repeatedly interrupted. Nothing fits.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: POSSIBILITIES OF AN UNPACKED CLOSET

"Tell me a story," I say to you.

"What about?"

"Tell me a story you have never told anyone before. Make it up for me."

– Isabel Allende, *The Stories of Eva Luna* (1991)

At the end of my journey, I would like to share an excerpt from my field notes. This was inspired by K's memory of an embodied experience of arriving home.

> *Homecoming is uncanny. I remember, very vaguely, Sigmund Freud saying that the unfamiliar cannot be uncanny, only the familiar can.[1] Some kind of disruption occurs within the familiarity and changes it, turns it over its head. Now that I am back, that is what I feel. Everything is familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Something* is *different. But I cannot point out what it is, and how it is so.*
>
> *I come home late at night, and the drive home from the airport is strange. As if I have stepped into a giant pastiche. Lights and patterns and structures packed together, forcibly. They barely fit, but somehow, they stand there, they sustain. I keep remembering Ghassan Hage's use of the word 'decay'[2]. When I think of decay, I generally visualise lack, or rubble. Some form of deserted dystopia. But there is no lack in Dhaka. In fact, there is quite the opposite. There is abundance. Excess, even. And no rubble, not really. Just construction. And, therefore, 'development'. Perpetually under construction, 'developing', becoming: but becoming what?*
>
> *Home comes back like muscle memory. I cross the fatally chaotic roads like a pro. I get equally as annoyed as before – no more and no less – when men stare at me. And*

[1] Freud (1955, p. 220)
[2] Hage (2021)

men stare – at me, at literally any woman who appears womanly and carries hands and feet and a torso. So many men – a sea of them, compared to the tiny drops of women on the streets – and they all stare. Not just stare, they scan. They take their sweet time. It is really the men that make me feel like I am home. An embodied feeling. A visceral reality check. It is not just the men that stare, it is the women too. And they all stare with conviction. A sense of purpose and entitlement. Like their staring would do something, accomplish something. Convey a message – although what that message may be remains unclear. I wonder if there is a sense of righteousness there, or just mindless gratification and a casual display of power.

I stay in Dhaka from the end of December 2022 to the end of January 2023. Almost the entire time I hate going out because it seems as if the whole city is being dug up all at once. Like a grave. A mass grave of development. Dust floats in the air like fog. The traffic seems worse. The noise gets on my nerves too. A never-ending combination of construction tools and motor horns and water pumps and air conditioners and generators. A humming that you realise was there all along only when it stops for a moment and then starts again.

The development makes me sick. Literally. I catch the worst ever cold with a flare-up of my usual allergies. The whole time in Dhaka I do drugs. Montaire and Fenadin and Azith. Antibiotics that fix my cold but mess up my stomach. My usual non-drowsy allergy meds stop working and I take Avil. Avil that calms down the itch but makes me sleep like death. The physical itch grows to become a mental one. I miss 'home'. Not Sydney but the house where I live in Sydney, the house that I designed as my own. It surprises me that my idea of home has evolved, shifted.

Things start to take a different turn after two weeks. I start meeting my participants, (and I regret upon realising how much I had missed out on by doing Zoom interviews during the pandemic). I visit my friends, my old workplace, my university. I have conversations about my research and feel a rejuvenated rigour for it. I laugh – genuinely laugh – in the face of chaos. I notice my existential crisis turning absurd in Dhaka. I find humour in misfortune. I suspect if it is a site-specific mindset, a quality that can only be acquired here. My friends tell me that I laugh louder now: heads did

turn in a restaurant to look at me while I laughed. It compels me to make paranoid observations: Do I laugh louder, or have people in Dhaka forgotten how to laugh?

My system gradually restores itself. My allergy grows milder. My skin gets better (think glowing*). I lose two kilos of weight without even trying and find lightness in movement. I feel like singing again, after ages. I write a poem. I notice a drastic shift in my mood. Being back in the almost surreal chaos of my natural habitat does wonders to me after the fatigue of spending three uninterrupted years in a city that is characterised as 'liberal', 'multicultural', and 'cosmopolitan'. I feel happy. I feel what I think very closely resembles true joy.*

My initial hurry to cram twenty-seven years' worth of experiences in thirty-five days calms down. The riddle of coming home begins to make sense. I try to differentiate between isolation in Sydney and now Dhaka. In Sydney, it stems from a general sense of non-belongingness, paired with systemic discriminations that have become all the more transparent since the pandemic. In Dhaka, it stems from a completely different sense of non-belongingness, one that combines boredom and a feeling of loss – as if there is no place left for me in this city, and no people that I could call mine.

I wonder if this back and forth of dislocation is merely spatial or temporal too. Both Dhaka and I have changed. Dhaka has gone through an infrastructural and ideological shift, whereas I have gone through an intellectual and emotional one. We were changing in two different places, passing through the same time. And now that we meet again, we cling to the memories of each other. Like long-distance lovers. We stare each other in the face – wanting to talk, but failing to find the right words.

I began this research with the following questions: What does 'coming out of the closet' mean – if anything at all – for queer Bangladeshi women? How do they perceive their own identities in the midst of broader struggles over queer visibility, LGBTQIA+ rights, and gender equality in Bangladesh? Taking 'coming out of the closet' as a point of departure, I ventured into a range of other topics that emerged in my discussions with my participants: articulations of sexual and gender identities, negotiations with parental expectations, belonging in communities, future aspirations, and desires both to leave and to stay.

There are several themes that emerged throughout this research that have potential for further studies. As indicated in the vignette above, embodiment is one such theme. I returned to Dhaka quite late in my study. Even though my initial plan was to conduct fieldwork in Bangladesh in the early stages of research, COVID restricted my travels. Upon going back to Dhaka – my field of research and also my home – I discovered that research is an embodied practice. While I engaged with concepts like 'mobility' and 'development' intellectually, they also manifested physically and viscerally. It was further intensified by the fact that there were similarities between the experiences of my participants and mine. My body reacted to pollution caused by poorly-planned development activities and the attendant stress of living in Dhaka – something that my Dhaka-dwelling participants felt too. Similarly, in Sydney I felt an unexpected sense of solidarity with my on-the-move participants as we shared feelings of uncertainty around our futures.

The theme of humour also emerged toward the end of this study. There are many retellings across the chapters where I wrote 'laughs' within brackets. Most of these laughs occurred while my participants shared stories of worry, grief, and trauma. I engaged with David Halperin's (2012) work to inquire what this juxtaposition of sorrow and joy could mean. Halperin talks about the 'Fire Island Italian Widows' – gay men of Mediterranean descent who attend drag events wearing black frocks and veils (p. 179). They dress the way Italian peasant women dress upon the death of their husbands and mourn their lost lovers, friends, and members of their community. Halperin tells us that they do not merely perform 'a mockery of mourning', they also perform 'the real thing' (p. 179). If the Fire Island Italian Widows make fun of anything, it is first and foremost of their own suffering. Situations of horror or tragedy invoke laughter in them not because they do not feel negative affects, but because they feel them so intensely: 'They laugh in order not to cry, in order not to lapse into maudlin self-pity' (p. 186). The pain, Halperin adds, does not cease when Fire Island Italian Widows are laughing; rather, it becomes sharper and more precise. But laughter provides tragedy with 'an acknowledged place, a specific social and emotional location', such that it no longer feels 'quite so incapacitating, or so isolating' (p. 186). My participants suffer, but they refuse to *perform* suffering as such (p. 187). Within the spectrum of queer affect and emotions, humour as a register of speech and camaraderie within queer communities in Bangladesh deserves further attention.

This project also complicated the notions of patriarchy, homophobia, and the primacy of religion for me. In Chapter 2 (Part 1), I discussed the example of Sraboni's brother, who juxtaposed misogyny and homophobia alongside familial duty and love for his sister. Patriarchy and homophobia come to be articulated through familial relations specific to the cultural and social context of Bangladesh. Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) argues that patriarchy is 'probably the most overused and, in some respects, the most undertheorized' within feminist theory (p. 274). She proposed that patriarchy appears to be too broad and too vague a concept, whereas specific strategies such as patriarchal bargains can reveal the 'blueprint' of how patriarchy operates in a society (p. 275). More recently, Hongwei Bao (2013) demonstrates, with his own queer disclosure, that homophobia is not always simple and straight-forward, and is dependent on context. There is scope to delve deeper into the pragmatics of patriarchy and homophobia, not simply as attitudes or ideologies, but as enactments within dense social fields that also include love, care, obligation, and so on.

There are four distinct elements in the research that I could not engage with as deeply as I would have preferred, but they could be pursued further. First, there may be future opportunities to consider how masculinities in Bangladesh interact with and shape queer women's identities and relationships. Mother-daughter dynamics were a frequent topic introduced by participants in my interviews; by contrast, conversations about fathers were largely absent. Zainab also mentioned that her father was not as involved in the lives of the children, and the responsibility of the children's education and marriage rested on her mother. But this relative silence may also be instructive: future research could begin with more deliberate attention to the practices of men (e.g., relatives, friends, partners) within the world-making of queer women. Second, the role of religion in the lives of my participants, or the lack thereof, proved to be surprising to me. I expected religion to hold a significant place in my research, since it appeared to be a dominant theme in Bangladeshi feminist and queer scholarship (e.g., in Feldman 2001, Shehabuddin 2008, Siddiqi 2019). In the lives of my participants, however, it played a relatively minor role. Even those who experienced prejudice because of religious ideologies (such as Zainab), or those who were critical of religious practices like the *waz* or Islamic sermons (such as Nusrat and Yasmin), seemed to be aware that strong religious ideologies – including those leading to homophobic violence – do not exist in a vacuum, and that there are broader

social and political factors involved. Compared with religion, financial stresses had a more significant influence on the lives of my participants, as indicated in interviews with Zainab and K. Third, while I outlined my participants' thoughts on popular culture, and discussed a small number of texts in further detail, there is ample scope for more exploration. While queer women's identities are rarely represented in Bangladeshi popular culture, could there be representations of alternative femininities that step outside of heteronormative frames? This question has been asked in the context of South Asia in general (e.g., Gopinath 2005), but rarely for Bangladesh in particular. Bisexuality is another such element – this theme emerged in nascent forms through conversations with participants, but could easily be a site of dedicated future inquiry. Finally, while social media assisted me in my recruitment of participants, I did not engage with it in my research. My participant Sraboni encouraged me to look at TikTok for 'interesting queer content'. Taposhi mentioned TikTok as well and informed me that queer people based in smaller towns outside of Dhaka are using it for self-expression in intriguing ways. TikTok appears to be a potential platform for further investigation. Taposhi also mentioned that there is a disconnect between how the 'millennial' members of the community relate to queer activism and how 'Gen Z' members do. We need to know more about the lived experiences of Gen Z queer Bangladeshis as they carve out new kinds of queer spaces for themselves.

Although there is a lot left to discover about queer women in Bangladesh, there are also things I know now that only engagement with interview participants could have revealed. My initial priority had been to focus on identity: how queer Bangladeshi women understand their own identities, and how their identities fit within national images of womanhood as well as with global understandings of 'queerness'. Keeping in mind the centrality of disclosures in global queer culture, and their connection with queer identities, I assumed that this would be an exploration of the identities of my participants in the context of queer rights and visibility. However, through interviews with research participants, what emerged was less about identities *per se* than about belonging– my participants' desires and attempts to find a sense of belonging, and their encounters with intersecting forms of non-belonging. And this was expressed, most consistently, through themes of friction and dissonance. Friction between words and experiences, expectations and realities, *being* and *doing*. Friction between the personal, the national, and the global. My participants can neither unhesitatingly accept global gender and sexual identifying

categories, nor can they find viable local alternatives. Global terminologies remain inadequate, and their own words fail them, too. This is also evident in experiences of disclosure, the theme with which I began my inquiry. The aftermaths of disclosures range from tacit understandings to agonistic reactions to continuous – ongoing, repetitive, redundant – enactments of 'coming out'. A tension also exists between queer women and queer communities in Bangladesh, maintained in part by the mutual incoherence of nomenclatures and development frameworks provided by different NGOs and state actors. Dissonance can also be traced between feminist movements and queer movements, such that queer women remain a marginal category across both terrains. Finally, queer representations too fall short in connecting to the lived experiences of queer Bangladeshi women. The available points of references do not speak to them, the possibility of finding the right points of references seems difficult. Nothing feels *quite right*.

Living in such circumstances marked by friction has affected how my participants envision the future. A happy queer future appears impossible to imagine. Friction emerges between personal dreams of happiness, parental expectations of a good life and a good future, and national discourses of development and womanhood. Promised futures do not cater to my participants' needs or desires. They feel stuck. Sometimes they envision leaving, and sometimes they embrace what Sara Ahmed (2010) calls queer pessimism and choose radical hopelessness.

While some fantasise about leaving, others do leave. But the stuckedness follows them. Stuckedness travels, mutates, becomes larger and larger as new frictions emerge. They manifest in different ways across generations – some bargain with patriarchy, some bargain with White privilege across transnational locations. The mobility of stuckedness affects participants' identities, kinship relations, imaginings of the future, and senses of belongingness. The gap between 'queer' and 'woman' does not close or dissipate – it continues to impact my participants across space and time. As they carry travelling troubles inherited from the homeland, the homeland itself fades away. The search continues – perhaps the next destination is the one where they will feel like they belong. But nothing fits. My participants keep chasing the dream of a happy queer future, and it remains forever fleeting.

But ending on an unhappy note will do my participants a great disservice. As indicated above, in my interviews with participants there was always laughter. They laughed as they shared stories of joy with me, and they laughed as they shared stories of sorrow. I do not wish to glorify their struggles, but I must acknowledge the candidness with which they face them, and I must invoke hope. In the writing of this thesis, I aspired to address a research gap within a research gap – to incorporate the routinely unheeded voices of queer women within an already underexplored field of gender and sexuality studies in Bangladesh. The fields of South Asian feminist and queer scholarship, feminist studies of popular culture, affect, and emotion, and phenomenological anthropology encouraged me to prioritise nuances and the intricate minutiae of everyday life – parts that are bigger than the whole. One such part – unpacking the closet – has opened up countless avenues to explore regarding research on queer Bangladeshi women. One must begin somewhere. I consider this a hopeful, and perhaps even happy, beginning.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

SEARCHING FOR PARTICIPANTS FOR RESEARCH ON QUEER BANGLADESHI WOMEN

Hi! My name is Anika Shah and I am a PhD student in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney. I am conducting research into exploring queer identities in Bangladesh, with a focus on notions of the 'closet' and 'coming out'. I want to better understand how queer popular cultures affect the identities and lived experiences of non-heterosexual people in Bangladesh. As part of this, I want to primarily interview queer Bangladeshi women, either based in Bangladesh or abroad.

I would welcome your help in conducting this research. I would like to take a semi-structured interview on Zoom, or in person if you are currently living in Australia. The interview should take no more than one hour of your time. Discussions will involve subjects such as intimacy, relationships, kinship, sexuality, and queer representations in popular culture. If you are a writer, artist, or activist, the interview may also involve discussing your public websites or social media pages. Your identity and other identifying details will be kept anonymous in however form you prefer.

You are under no obligation to participate in this research. But, if you are interested in participating, I would be glad if you would contact me on the email: Anika.Shah@student.uts.edu.au

I will be looking forward to hearing from you and having a chat!

Appendix B: Sample Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about a time when you talked to someone about your sexuality?
    - If you have, how did it go?
    - If you haven't, do you want to?
    - Was it a family member, friend, or a partner?
    - Do you think they already knew, or had an idea about it?
2. What do you think about coming out of the closet?
    - Do you feel like you are in the closet, or you are keeping a secret that you should disclose?
    - Is there a different word or phrase you prefer to express your sexuality, or the experience of disclosure?
3. Are there spaces where you share more about your sexuality, like a queer community or organisation?
    - If you are a part of one, how did that happen?
    - If you are not a part of a queer community, have you ever thought about getting in touch with one?
    - How do you feel about online queer spaces?
    - Can you recall being in a space where you felt at home, regardless of it being a queer space?
4. To what extent has popular culture (books, films, music, etc.) been important to you in thinking about your sexuality or intimacy?
    - Is there any story, character, or artist from popular culture that inspires you?
    - Can you relate to any popular representations of queer people?
    - What do you think about queer popular culture in Bangladesh?
    - How do you feel about Bangladeshi queer cultural content in comparison to, for instance, Bollywood or Hollywood?
5. Do you think queer activism and queer creative expressions go hand in hand in Bangladesh?
    - Can you talk to me about any struggles you faced because of the legal limitations that queer people have in Bangladesh?
6. Do you feel that you are more comfortable with your sexuality since you moved away from your city or country?
    - If you are still living at home, do you plan on moving away from you city or country?
    - Do you think living in hostels gave you more freedom to explore your sexuality and express yourself?
7. How do you feel about marriage, or having children? Is that important to you?
    - Are there any family expectations about it?
    - Do you have a partner?
    - Have you ever discussed getting married or having children with your partner?
    - Have you ever had trouble navigating monogamy in a relationship?

Appendix C: A Timeline of the Highlights of Queer Activism in Bangladesh[3]

2002 Boys of Bangladesh (BoB) begins operating as the oldest and largest network of self-identified gay men in Bangladesh

2010 Avijit Roy publishes his book *Shomokamita* (*Homosexuality*)

2014 Roopbaan begins operating as a volunteer-led non-profit platform for Bangladeshi queer individuals and their allies, publishes the magazine *Roopbaan*

BoB and Roopbaan jointly conduct the first ever LGBT Need Assessment Survey in Bangladesh

The Social Welfare Ministry of Bangladesh acknowledges the sex of *Hijra* people as "*Hijra* sex" in a gazette

An NGO lauches an annual event called *Hijra* Pride

Roopbaan organises Rainbow Rally

Roopbaan organises Pink Slip, an initiative to raise awareness on sexual health and safety

BoB receives a grant for Project Dhee

2015 Roopbaan organises Rainbow Rally

Roopbaan organises Pink Slip, an initiative to raise awareness on sexual health and safety

Roopbaan publishes a book of queer poetry named *Roopongti*

BoB inaugurates Project Dhee, launches the first ever homosexual comic character 'Dhee' in Bangladesh

Avijit Roy, the writer of *Shomokamita*, is murdered

2016 Xulhaz Mannan and K Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy, the co-founder and founding general secretary of Roopbaan respectively, are murdered

2017 27 men in Keraniganj, Dhaka are arrested on suspicion of being homosexual, but are officially charged with drug offence

2018 The Digital Security Act passes

2019 Roopbaan publishes *Iti Roopbaan*, a book containing a series of letters collected from the queer community in Bangladesh

Mondro, a volunteer-led non-profit organisation, launches its website as the largest public queer archive in Bangladesh

[3] Collected from the websites of BoB, Roopbaan, Mondro, and ILGA Asia Country Report (2021)

Appendix D: A List of Relatable Popular Culture Favoured by Participants

Books	Annotations
Mrs. Dalloway (Virginia Woolf, 1925)	Maha's favourite for its queer subtext. Discussed in Chapter 3.
Shomokamita (Homosexuality) (Avijit Roy, 2010)	Sraboni appreciated the book because 'it was very informative and had a lot of references'.

Films	Annotations
A Secret Love (Chris Bolan, 2020)	Zainab's recommendation.
Blue is the Warmest Colour (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2014)	A reference point for Nusrat (detailed in Chapter 2). Also liked by Zainab. Taposhi mentioned it too.
Call Me By Your Name (Luca Guadanino, 2017)	Sraboni enjoyed watching it,
Elisa & Marcela (Isabel Coixet, 2019)	Zainab's recommendation.
Fire (Deepa Mehta, 1996)	Taposhi thought it was 'so progressive', and noted that 'there was nothing as strong as that afterwards' in Bollywood. Yasmin recalled it as a memorable film too.
Happiest Season (Clea DuVall, 2020)	Enjoyed by Roshni. Discussed in Chapter 2.
Happy Together (Wong Kar-wai, 1997)	Sraboni's favourite, along with all other Wong Kar-wai films.
If These Walls Could Talk 2 (Jane Anderson, Martha Coolidge &Anne Heche, 2000)	Zainab recalled watching it. She liked the last storyline in this anthology and found it relatable.
Imagine Me & You (Ol Parker, 2006)	Taposhi recalled it as a popular film. Roshini called it a classic.
Monpura (Giasuddin Selim, 2009)	A Bangladeshi film. There is no queer storyline, but Zainab relates to the sorrow in its tragic ending. Discussed in Chapter 2.
Room in Rome (Julio Medem, 2010)	Recalled by Taposhi.
Shiddat (Kunal Deshmukh, 2021)	A reference point for Zainab. There is no queer storyline in the film, but she relates to it anyway. Discussed in Chapter 2.

Photography	Annotations
Nan Goldin	Sraboni's favourite photographer. She appreciates her self-portraits because 'it feels honest'. Discussed in Chapter 2.

TV Shows	Annotations
90210 (Rob Thomas, Gabe Sachs & Jeff Judah, 2008)	One of the earliest queer representations that Maha came across. Discussed in Chapter 2.
Four More Shots Please (Anu Menon & Nupur Asthana, 2019)	Roshni liked seeing a queer relationship depicted in it. Discussed in Chapter 2.
Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha (Yoo Je-won, 2021)	A K-drama Maha enjoyed because it had 'a gay character' in a 'normal drama'. Discussed in Chapter 2.
Made in Heaven (Zoya Akhtar & Reema Kagti, 2019)	Taposhi remembered it as 'a good series about wedding planners where one character is gay'.
Sort Of (Bilal Baig & Fab Filippo, 2021)	K mentioned that they were excited to see it. Discussed in Chapter 4.
The Bold Type (Sarah Watson, 2017)	Roshni appreciated a character here who is a queer woman of colour. Discussed in Chapter 2.
The Ellen Show (Ellen DeGeneres, Mitchell Hurwitz & Carol Leifer, 2001)	One of the earliest queer representations Maha was exposed to. Discussed in Chapter 2.

Website	Annotations
Mondro, 2019	Significant for K's self-understanding. Detailed in Chapter 2.

Media Personality	Annotations
Alok Vaid-Menon	K finds them relatable 'because of their relation to body hair and femininity, and their relation to trans history and trancestors'. They also like Alok's poetry.

Music	Annotations
Ayub Bachchu and Miles	Zainab's favourites. Ayub Bachchu was a famous Bangladeshi rock musician, and Miles is a popular Bangladeshi band. Zainab finds refuge in their songs. Discussed in Chapter 2.
Baul music and Qawwali music	Baul music is a folk musical genre in Bangladesh and in South Asia. They tend to be spiritual and mystical is nature. Qawwali is Sufi Islamic devotional music. Both have significant impact on K's understanding of their queerness and diaspora identity. Detailed in Chapter 2.

List of Publications and Conference Presentations

Publications

Shah, A. 2023, 'The "Bangladesh Paradox": Reflecting on History to Navigate Research on Queer Bangladeshi Women', *Writing from Below*, vol. 6, no. 1, viewed 4 January 2024, <https://writingfrombelow.org/imagining-new-futures/new-title/>.

Conference Presentations

Presented a paper titled 'Women on the Run: Mobility and Aspiration in Queer Bangladesh' in the CSAA 30th Anniversary Conference at RMIT University, Melbourne on 1-3 December 2022.

Presented a paper titled 'Of Mothers and Daughters: Mobility, Kinship, and Class in Queer Bangladesh' in the Australian Women's and Gender Studies Association (AWGSA) Biannual Conference 'Activist Energies' at the University of Melbourne on 28-30 November 2022.

Presented a paper titled 'Why Here? Why Women? Why Queer?: Contextualising Research on Bangladeshi Queer Culture' in the CSAA 'Bodies in Flux' Conference at Edith Cowan University, Perth on 28-30 June 2022.

Presented a paper titled 'Queer Disclosures: A Reading of Tanwi Nandini Islam's *Bright Lines*' in the Australian Women's and Gender Studies Association (AWGSA) Biannual Conference 'Unknowing' Institutions: Decolonisation and Critical Intersectional Practice at Flinders University, Adelaide on 13-16 July 2021.