# Of Ambivalent Identities: A reflexive exploration of identity construction of adolescent girls as Muslim women inside Bangladeshi madrasahs

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# ABSTRACT

The following paper explores how adolescent girls in Bangladeshi madrasahs conceptualize their identities as Muslim women in lieu of the author's own experiences. The conceptual framework has been constructed using three broad themes beginning with the social constructionist perspective followed by exploring the Multiple Dimensions of Identity Theory to explore the link between multiple dimensions of identity and meaning making i.e. the ability to perceive relationships between and among their multiple identities and noticing the tensions and conflicts, awareness of their inability to reconcile multiple identities. The third theme will draw upon Judith Butler's interpretation of subjectification i.e. the processes through which we are subjected, and actively take up as our own the terms of our subjection. In addition to the three themes, the research will heavily rely on Himani Bannerji (1995) for her thoughts of production of the Other in her essay "But who speaks for us- Experience and Agency in Conventional Feminist Paradigms." The concept of the social production of the other through employing two research methods i.e. writing storied poems about the author's own experiences of working closely with adolescents in a Bangladeshi madrasah boarding school and analyzing the artwork produced by two female students in response to the question, "How do you see yourself as a woman?" The research indicates that there is no one conceptualization of identities. Identities in Bangladesh are ambivalent and there is a necessity to depend our understanding of this ambivalence as academics and researchers. This ambivalence, though uncomfortable, must be engaged with in order to understand how individuals become and take up their own terms of subjection.

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| Madrasahs | An institution for the study of Islamic theology and religious law. In Bangladesh some madrasahs teach secular subjects alongside theology. |
| Pohela Baishakh | The Bengali New Year celebrated on April 14 |
| Mongol Shobhajatra | Mass procession that takes place at dawn on the first day of the Bengali New Year in Bangladesh |
| Sari | A sari, saree, or shari is a female garment from the Indian subcontinent that consists of a drape varying from five to nine yards (4.5 metres to 8 metres) in length and two to four feet (60 cm to 1.20 m) in breadth that is typically wrapped around the waist, with one end draped over the shoulder, baring the midriff. |
| Hijaab | a veil worn by some Muslim women in the presence of any male outside of their immediate family, which usually covers the head and chest |

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION- THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

"There is no better point of entry into a critique or a reflection than one's own ex perience." (Bannerji, 1995).

**The Self**

As a religious, Bangladeshi Muslim woman, who has grown up in different coun-tries and has had the privilege to have encountered several cultural interpretations of Islam, I feel that where conservative, patriarchal interpretations of Islam prevail, there lies a risk of one never fully developing a sense of identity. Many a times, I feel as though that my gender identity, my religious identity, my national identity and my global identity are at war with each other.

In psychology, the term identity crisis refers to the failure to achieve ego identity during adolescence (Erikson, 1970). Erikson explores eight stages of psychosocial de-velopment, at each of which a psychosocial crises may develop. At Identity Cohesion vs. Role Confusion stage, during which adolescents form their self-image and endure the task of resolving the crisis of their basic ego identity, there is a risk of developing an identity crisis. Successful resolution of the crisis depends on one's progress through previous developmental stages, revolving around issues such as trust, autonomy, and initiative.

I grew up struggling to find a sense of belonging. My early childhood was spent moving across different cities and countries. I went to an English medium school where I studied under a British education system, and was taught very little Bangladeshi history, which impelled a kind of disassociation from my national identity. As I grew up and moved to Canada, my experiences led me to clutch on firmly, sometimes to my religious identity and sometimes to my national identity, all the while, simultaneously co-existing and conflicting with my global identity.

My experience as a Bengali, Muslim woman who has been and is being educated in a colonial education system, speaking the colonial language, learning a colonial history while wearing her brown skin and her hijab as symbols of the orient. There exists a conflict between the two parts of the self i.e. the colonized and the colonizer. I experience a complicated phenomenon as a "brown" woman, produced in the colonial society within a colonial education system, which teaches English i.e. the language of the colonizer, as the primary language of communication. While my body transformed battleground of cultures, I turned inward to find solace in my faith.

As part of the Canadian education experience, the classrooms I am placed in are also deeply introspective. Questions like who are we and what shapes our identities emerge and remerge. So, what it means to be a brown woman in Canada is something I am forced to explore. I realize that colonialism has left its imprints on our psyche like a long-term, incurable disease. We wear it on our skins, on our tongues, on our fingers as we type words in languages that are colonial. Sitting in classrooms, surrounded by white people, one is compelled to look around and ask, how much of colonialism do I carry? How much of it can I fight? And how do I fight it, if, at all, I do? Everything; the skin, lan-

guage, clothes, all of it is a political statement. The very act of existing becomes war-fare. The two conflicting cultures that I simultaneously embody become a political statement. In such a situation, my linguistic, ethnic religious identities become dear to me, more than they have ever been. Clinging fiercely to parts of myself that feel more like "home"- whatever that may be- is my way of securing my roots that I live in constant fear of losing.

As I continued my pursuit of education, I found solace, interestingly, in the very same classrooms that taught writers such as Bannerji and Fanon, who had experienced "Otherness", in much similar ways. For instance, in the chapter "Lived Experiences of a Black Man" in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1967) points to the limitation of ontology in allowing us to understand the experience of the black man. At the beginning of the essay, Fanon refers to himself as being an "object among other objects" (p. 89). He goes on to narrate the experience of objectification, realized by people of colour, our parts valued more than our whole, "a slave... to my appearance" (p. 95) and bodies "re-turned… spread eagled, disjointed, draped in mourning on a white winter's day" (p. 93) Much of this objectification is experienced by a woman of colour the same way as it is by a man of colour, forcing her to encounter similar difficulties in bodily schema i.e. the construction of the self as a body in a temporal and spatial world. I wrote poetry as a way to mitigate the self-contempt and shame, I experienced in my body, the same way Fanon describes experiencing in his.

While what we wear, the colour of our skin, and the language we speak, the faith we practise are all inherently personal experiences, these experiences transcend into the public sphere by virtue of being carried by marked bodies. Bannerji (1995) also

refers to publicizing the private in her critique of Marxist-Feminism, "In this attempt to make "the private" public, lived social relations and forms of consciousness that constitute a personal, cultural, home life- all dubbed subjective, and therefore phenomenal, remain outside of the purview of an analysis of class and capitalism" (p.76).

As a bearer of the colonial legacy, with neurolinguistic imprints of the colonizer embedded in my body, often times I internalize the narrative that is perpetuated about women of color i.e. the backward woman in need of saving by the colonial culture. The west represents progress and development. I, have been produced in contrast as, representative of the poor and underdeveloped. The extent of this internalization is also something I encountered during classroom experiences in Canada. For example, during a class discussion on the participation of women in the academia, particularly in science and technology, a classmate pointed out how in attending an out-of-town conference, women (of the west) will usually pack two pairs of clothing for her trip i.e. a suit for the conference and a dress for the after party. Women participating in the workforce are in powerful roles and almost always embody male characteristics. The suit exudes power. It is the garb of a man. Donning a suit transfers some of that power, in an unequal environment, onto the woman.

This, however, is not the case in the country where I come from, where most women strut into conference rooms in *saris*, a rather feminine garment. During experiences like this, my Bangladeshi identity takes precedence over my global identity and becomes the safe space within myself where I seek comfort. Bannerji (1995) would be critical of, once again, being produced as 'the feminine' through reinforcing otherness to men. However, in a strange way, the oriental woman's garment does become trans-

gressive, and in turn, empowering, in a patriarchal society. By wearing a garment that is decidedly feminine and walking into traditionally male-dominated environments, the woman inherently makes a statement about who she is, her power and ownership. She does not need the garb of the man to transfer power onto herself.

The two yards of fabric wrapped around my head, i.e. my hijab, also a piece of 'oriental clothing', marking me as decidedly feminine, performs the same function as the *sari*, of being transgressive in a patriarchal, colonial society and in spaces traditionally dominated by white men.. As a symbol of the feminine and the orient, at times when I want to escape the colonial imprints on myself, my headscarf – a representative of my Muslim identity - then becomes the object of my comfort. It is how I assert myself and occupy space as a Muslim and as the feminine. I wrap my 'oriental' garments around myself lovingly, caringly, simultaneously engaging in acts of self-acceptance or self-preservation, and bellowing out a silent war cry, a rebellion, an act of political warfare. As Lorde defines in her epilogue in *A Burst of Light*, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." (Lorde, 1992)

This empowerment, however, is subjective and contingent upon time and space, depending on which acts are transgressive and where. The Orient cannot be painted in a single brushstroke. The same garments that are transgressive in a western society become compliant in a non-western one. In a Muslim-majority Bangladesh, the hijab is not transgressive. Neither is Western colonization deemed a big threat. In fact, the repercussions of Western colonization is often overriden by a fear of Arab colonization. The patronage of ultra-conservative Arab Muslims and their local adherents in Bangladesh are sections of Bangladeshi Muslims feared to be adopting orthodox Wahhabi-

Salafi ideologies, practices and vocabulary. This Islamic identity marginalizes women, 'Bengali-ness', art and feminist ideologies, and, as a result, creating a split in those who want to identify themselves as 'progressive Muslims'.

Hashmi (2015) expresses his fear that while Arabization has elements of non-Arab Muslims' quest for upward mobility, it is also an elite plan of action to politically hegemonize mass consciousness. Muslims of Bangladesh have significant difficulty in distinguishing between what is Islamic and what is Arab. Arabization of the popular culture has become synonymous with the Islamization process in Bangladesh. Hashmi asserts that this synonymity has long-drawn implications for the country as erosion of Bengali culture, a cultural transformation and an eventual shift towards a Wahhabi political orientation and makeover.

An article titled *Rising violence in Bangladesh: What's behind it?* published on inquirer.net has reported an escalating rise in conflict from both a result of internal conflict between major political parties as well as fallen victim to international terrorism. On the night of 1 July 2016, five militants took hostages and opened fire in the Holey Artisan Bakery in Gulshan Thana—an affluent area home to many embassies in Dhaka, Bangladesh. 29 people were killed, including 20 hostages (18 foreigners and two locals), two police officers, five gunmen, and two bakery staff (Staff, 2016). However, this was not the first attack to have taken place. An article on the Foreign Affairs asserts that the flurry of terrorist activity that has unfolded in the country seems to indicate that, as of July 2017, Bangladesh remains in ISIS and AQIS' crosshairs—even after stepped-up counterterrorism efforts. Even though the country is not as ravaged by terrorism as

are some of its neighbors in South Asia, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Still, the problem persists.

What is even more worrying is that society is changing in turn. The country had been identified as relatively hospitable for its roughly 16 million non-Muslim citizens (about a tenth of its overall population). As recently as 2013, Dan Mozena, the-then U.S. ambassador in Dhaka, remarked that Bangladesh was a "moderate, tolerant, democratic country" and "a viable alternative to violent extremism in a troubled region of the world." (Kugelman and Ahmad, 2017). From February to August 2015, four prominent atheist bloggers were killed by machete-wielding assailants, three attacks continuing into 2016, with the deaths of over 15 people—including religious minorities, social workers, and USAID employee Xulhaz Mannan. The assaults were claimed by ISIS, AQIS, and ABT, all of which have close ties to Al-Qaeda. It is not the phenomenon of rising extremism in Bangladesh that I aim to investigate in my research but the complicated phenomenon of Muslim-ness in Bangladesh which all Muslims in Bangladesh experience in varying degrees.

Muslim-ness in post 1971 Bangladesh, has been a complicated phenomenon Absar (2014) states how even though the Islamic identity has always been an important part of a historical confrontation in the Bengal, the 'ties of language' held primacy over religious and other components of cultural inheritance - according to leftist, secularist, intellectual groups who had the upper hand in the universities, academic forums and the media. While there is no apparent reason for conflict between the Muslim and the Bengali identity -one being religious and the other linguistic -  the liberal belligerence to Is-

lamic movements in Bangladesh has been compared to the western fears and stereo-types routinely dumped on the so called Muslim fundamentalism".

As a result, Muslim Bengalis who let their religious identity take precedence over any other identity, which I sometimes do, have felt marginalized. Many Islamic writers, scholars and politicians faulted the secularists and Bengali nationalists of deliberately disregarding the distinctive Muslim heritage. While the Bangladeshi identity remains an ambivalent quest, Muslim-ness is yet to be fully accommodated within this identity.

**Reflection in the Other**

When I started my work with madrasahs i.e. religious institutions in Dhaka in 2012, it was with an obscure hope of resolving the clash of identities within myself. I saw a reflection of this split of my Self and conflict of identities among the girls I worked with. My hypothesis at that point was in enabling one to be seen, I would enable them to resolve this conflict of identities amongst themselves.

The first time I visited an all girls madrasah school was in 2014. I remember walking into the room which they used both as a classroom and their bedroom. About 20 to 30 girls were scurrying around, restless, afraid, or maybe just shy of outsiders. We, therefore, sat down and reassured them. We were just there to talk. They huddled together, clutching their knees, quite literally shrinking themselves, one or two of them bold enough to slowly inch forward as we spoke. Over time, their postures changed, they opened up and their eyes lit up with hope instead of fear as we slowly broke the ice with them. Their voices, previously muted when we were talking about science and lan-

guage as subjects of interest, grew louder and more confident as they started speaking about religion. Something interesting was happening at that moment where the girls were using their mastery over religion to empower themselves i.e. take up the terms of their subjection (Butler, 1995a), a theme I will explore as part of my theoretical framework. My curiosity was peaked then, about how these girls viewed themselves.

Having worked with these girls for over three years at this point, and having inhabited space on this earth for over 29 years, I believe, the way to resolving this crisis for them was to be seen as themselves and as their whole selves. Brown (2010), in her research on shame and vulnerability, speaks on the importance of being seen. In various parts of her work, she speaks about the importance of "showing up and being seen" (2010) and how "courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen" (2015). Much of my work in the field has been guided by this principle i.e. human beings' desire to be seen. So, I have worked backwards. My theoretical framework, as well as my practical work in the field, has been derived from my life experiences instead of the other way round. I realized that there is very little research that serves even as a starting point to understanding how female identities of are formed in Bangladesh, particularly within these institutions, rigid spaces, where Muslim identities frequently take precedence over all else.

After three years of working in the field, trying to design programs to cater to their various needs, ranging from skill-building to psychosocial support activities, I decided to explore theoretically, how their identities are shaped. In order address the knowledge gap in the research area of female student voice in madrasahs, my research seeks to

ask the question: How do adolescent girls conceptualize their identities as Muslim Bengali women in madrasahs of Bangladesh?

In order to answer the question, I will use a conceptual framework that is derived from social constructionism, intersectionality, multiple dimensions of identity and the theory of subjection. I will explore the concept of their self in relation to my own. To do this, a combination of methodologies will be employed. While the methodologies will primarily derive from the broad school of narrative inquiry, the methods would include, firstly analyzing the students' artwork as narratives and, secondly, using poetic inquiry as a methodology, analyze a poem I wrote based on my own experience of collecting stories from the students.

In the process, I hope to discover some more of myself as well.

## Historical Background

Identities are not formed in isolation. The exploration of the human identity anywhere, therefore, must begin with an exploration of the broader historical context of the region. The region of Bengal was first divided on the basis of language by the British in 1905, with Dhaka as capital of the east and Calcutta of the west. The first partition, however did not sustain because of a fierce resistance which led to the province being reunited in 1912. However, despite Muslim and Hindu leaders previously agreeing on an independent united Bengal, in 1947, the region was divided on the basis of religion, not language. Hence, the eastern part of Bengal became East Pakistan while the west remained part of India.

The Muslim element has always been present; otherwise, what was East Pakistan could have merged with the predominantly Hindu Indian state of West Bengal, where the same language is spoken (Islam, 1981). Religion has always been described as the single most important basis of Muslim nationhood, but it should be noted that Islam was employed as a means of fostering group identity to mobilize the masses in the pre-independence period. The importance of Islam grew as the Awami League began to have increasing friction with the country's powerful military, which began to use religion as a counterweight to the League's secular, vaguely socialist policies (Lintler, 2004).

The Bengali language movement played a critical role in the liberation war of Bangladesh that affected the madrasah communities. The declaration under General Bhutto's regime that Urdu was the language of the state was met with a strong resentment from Bengalis because it meant that they were at a disadvantage when applying for government positions. It led to a massacre in 1952 and eventually towards the liberation of the country in 1971. During this time, madrasahs were placed in an awkward position, since traditionally a strong emphasis on Urdu had been placed in this area. Because some madrasahs continued their curriculum in Urdu, the government and civil society has often accused madrasahs of breeding anti-liberation war sentiments amongst students. The international community has traditionally regarded madrasahs as the breeding ground for terrorism, based on the fundamentalist ideologies that they are assumed to promote by virtue of their religious orientation, because of which they are also reluctant to invest in sectoral development.

On the other hand, madrasahs themselves have also resisted external interventions from NGOs. When NGOs first started operating in Bangladesh, they were often

formed as part of Christian missionary organizations and undertook charitable activities in underdeveloped areas in order to convert people to Christianity.

> "There are other agencies in Bangladesh, which work, in close cooperation with the Protestant and Catholic missions. In many cases they act as 'front' organizations, whose long-term objective is evangelization by aiding or creating feasible contexts or conversions. There are more than 200 agencies n Bangladesh working directly and indirectly for evangelization." (Islam, 2016)

While the role of Islam and nationalist discourses on human identity is somewhat explored in the Bangladeshi context, how subjects are produced within these settings has been left largely unexplored, particularly, in terms of the impact that this struggle has had on the identities of women.

**The Phenomenon to be Researched**

The four types of educational institutions operating in Bangladesh are government schools, secular private schools, NGO-run schools, and madrasahs offering religious education. State-regulated, government-reformed aliya madrasahs integrate secular general subjects with a religious curriculum, whereas independent private Quomi madrasahs focus on solely religious education, with the aim of producing students with a deep understanding of Islamic teachings. My research will focus on female students in one single-sex aliya madrasah through an auto-ethnographic lens where I will engage with the data on a deeply personal and political level using my own experiences to shape my interpretation of the data.

Madrasahs have come under public scrutiny following 9/11 attacks in the United States, and more intensely again after the 2005 series of bombings across the 63 districts of Bangladesh (Ahmad & Nelson, 2009). The fundamentalist ideologies that they are assumed to promote by virtue of their religious orientation has rendered them as a breeding ground for terrorism in the eyes of the international community. On the other hand, madrasahs themselves have also resisted external interventions from NGOs, leaving the sector shrouded in mystery.

This lack of positive attention from the national and international communities has rendered the sector irrelevant. In fact, conservatism and religious extremism in the country is on the rise (Hasib, 2016). Parents who wish for their children to obtain marketable skills, but at the same time develop proficiency of the Quran and Hadith, form the majority of those who are sending their children to aliya madrasas. Marriage-related motivations also influence parental choice of schooling for girls, since it is perceived that madrasah education instills traditional values and increase their daughters' marriage prospects (Asadullah, Chakrabarti, & Chaudhury, 2013). Under the circumstances, aliya madrasahs, have become the preferred form of schooling for the more religiously-minded communities in the country, providing education opportunity to over 1.5 million girls in Bangladesh. By virtue of observing Islamic religious teachings—for example, about girls and boys occupying separate spaces—madrasahs help allay fears and concerns of many parents about protecting the honour of their daughters while in school. For these religiously-minded parents, aliya madrasahs offering both secular and religious education provide a comforting response to the social influence of a rapidly globalizing world. Parents from various socioeconomic strata are turning away from "regular" state

schools to madrasas to help preserve social values, and they are choosing to send their daughters to madrasahs based on the belief that madrasahs are safer for girls (Badrun-nesha & Kwauk, 2015).

This phenomenon is not unique to Bangladesh. An ethnographic case study of six single-sex girls' schools in Britain examined issues of patriarchy in the governance of the school, the different discourses of Islam among school leaders, teachers, students and parents, and the relationship between gender-segregated schools and the contested position of women in Islam conducted by Parker-Jenkins and Haw (1996). It was noted by the authors that the elders saw Islamic schools as a means of protection for girls, while parents saw them as a way to preserve values and identity (Shaikh and Kelley 1989; Basit 1997). However, in the study by Parker-Jenkins and Haw (1996), students challenged the conventional patriarchal notions of Muslim-ness as products of culture and not the religion of Islam. These students were able to use their knowledge of Islam to argue for alternative understandings that they felt better represented the status of women in Islam. In such a case, the bodies of Muslim women  then become political spaces wherein, by exercising, their right to their body and by conceptualizing their own identities, they claim spaces as political agents in society.

While the literature on Bangladeshi madrasahs and similar studies conducted in Britain and Canada (Zine, 2008) iterate that guardians, teachers and the community have notions of honour that madrasah schooling seems to uphold, how female students conceptualize their own identities as Muslim women within these educational institutions has been left largely unexplored. Various studies using sociological and anthropological frameworks to investigate religious identity (e.g. Jacobson, 1997; Zine, 2001; Peek,

2005) focus on cultural and social processes that impact upon, and constitute, the construction of religious identities, particularly upon Muslim children or adolescents in Western societies and educational institutions. My research will explore my relationship to the girls studying in these institutions vis-a-vis their artwork and my poetry, and attempt to answer the following research question i.e. how do adolescent girls in madrasahs conceptualize and negotiate their identities as Muslim women in Bangladesh?

# CHAPTER 2

## WEAVING THEORIES- THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

"Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and oblivion of one's own." (Eagleton, 2008)

Identities in Bangladesh (as well as in the rest of South Asia) and how they have been constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed, has been a complex phenomenon. To understand this complex phenomenon, a fairly complex conceptual framework will be constructed using three broad themes. In addition to the three themes, the research will heavily rely on Himani Bannerji (1995) for her thoughts of production of the Other in her essay "But who speaks for us- Experience and Agency in Conventional Feminist Paradigms."

To begin with, the social constructionist perspective where identity is socially, historically, politically and culturally constructed will be used. In contrast to an essentialist perspective based on dominant-subordinate binaries, e.g. men-women, heterosexual-homosexual, a social constructivist approach relies on the co-creation of knowledge with participants through shared meaning-making.

**Essentialism versus Constructionism**

Social constructionism or the social construction of reality (also a social concept) is a theory of knowledge in sociology and communication theory that examines the development of jointly constructed understandings of the world that form the basis for shared assumptions about reality. The theory centers on the notions that human beings rationalize their experience by creating models of the social world and share and reify these models through language (Leeds-Hurwitz, W., 2009). Essentialism, by contrast, is the view that every entity has a set of attributes that are necessary to its identity and function (Cartwright, Richard L., 1968). In the region of South Asia, its nation states and subsequently its people, have always adhered to an essentialist perspective to determine identity leading to an either/or situation. These identities have been state enforced and ascribed identity to a particular set of attributes, often perceived with a conflict. For example, identities have alternated between a linguistic identity - based on nationalist discourses - versus a religious discourse/identity.

The self is characterized as an entity that can classify itself in relation to other social categories (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In the social categorization process that Tajfel and Turner (1979) describes in their conception of social identity theory, an individual's self-image stems from the social categories which one sees him or herself as belonging. This social constructionist view on identity contrasts Plato's classical essentialism, where the latter concept is primarily concerned with the criteria for identification of oneself as part of a group (Stubblefield, 1995). However, identifying specific criteria for identification and defining group membership can be both problematic and challeng-

ing. In the case of Bangladesh, linguistic identities and religious identities have forever conflicted within individuals. Weber (1998) has theorized this phenomenon in describing how the social, political, economic, and psychological aspects of life are intertwined and, at times, exist interdependently. Borrowing from the field of Women's Studies, he emphasizes the importance of taking into account historical and geographical contexts to view different groups of race, class, gender and sexuality – especially because these systems are social constructs and not biologically pre-determined. These systems operate both at the institutional / macro level, as well as the psychological / micro level; and all operate to shape one's experiences and perspectives. It is important, therefore, to take into account the historical context and complexities in which the sector I am to study as part of my thesis has emerged.

As is the case with any group emerging as part of a broader sociopolitical and economic system, the madrasah based socio-political sector has used certain criterion for identification and group dynamics, namely religion. While educational institutions are traditionally independent of local political influences, the historical context within which madrasahs have emerged, have caused the sector to have social, political, economic, and psychological aspects deeply intertwined within the students produced within this sector.

The madrasah sector has had a complicated relationship with both the government and non-government bodies as well as international NGOs, which can be attributed to the state building policies centered on an essentialism-driven identity politics. The Bengali language movement that played a critical role in the liberation war of Bangladesh, affected the madrasah communities negatively. As mentioned previously it

was the fact that madrasahs at the time continued their curriculum in Urdu, as they had previously done, madrasahs have been subject to language politics and accused of breeding anti-liberation war sentiments amongst their students.

Halbwachs (1992) speaks of the power of language to communicate a collective memory, leading to the formation of an identity. In the case of Bangladesh, the struggle for independence began attempts to suppress the Bengali language, resulting in a state where language has moved beyond its role as a communicative tool to playing a central role in formation of identity itself. However, much of Islamic text is produced in Urdu, Arabic or Persian. As a result, those who identified themselves primarily as Muslims sometimes cannot fully integrate themselves within the "indigenous" Bangladeshi context, given that the country was founded on liberal socialist principles. This included, most prominently, students in madrasahs.

As a result, secularist nationalists still harbour resentment against the madrasah sector. On the other side, the now-banned Jamaat-i-Islami, a former political party founded in 1941 by Maulana Abul Ala Mauddudi, that had grown out of the Deoband Madrasah movement, went to the extent of "alleging that the demand for a separate state based on modern selfish nationalism amounted to rebelling against the tenets of Islam" (Kabir, 1994). It is not surprising, therefore, that the age-old question "Are you Muslim or are you Bengali?" keeps remerging and is most resonant amongst the madrasah community.

Gender norms in Bangladesh, as elsewhere, are intimately linked with religious beliefs and cultural practices. Tensions between religious conservatives and secular feminists are longstanding, demonstrating another area where identities have been 'es-

sentially' determined. Even though the performance of gender largely influenced by social norms, understanding of feminism has been another area where essentialism is practised leading to fragmentation of identities.

Members of Bangladesh's vocal and active women's movement have been ideologically rooted in traditional Western feminism, which has traditionally been non-intersectional and has only recently began to incorporate voices of women of colour, trans-women, etc. These members were fierce opponents of government-sponsored Islamization of the 1980s, citing religion as instrumental in the oppression of women in Bangladesh. It has been noted that Bangladeshi women's groups are predominantly composed of urban middle and upper-class women, mirroring strong class divisions in Bangladeshi society more broadly (Shehabuddin, 2008).

There is, therefore, a deep class divide that limits the participation of poor and rural women many of whom conceptualize and envision responses to oppression in different ways than those who drive discourse on women's rights nationally. The antagonistic stance of secular women's groups toward religion has, in some cases, alienated poor women and women of faith, leaving significant room for Islamists to champion the cause of these groups. Indeed, it has been observed that Islamist groups including those associated with the Jamaat-e-Islami are increasingly co-opting some of the rights-focused language of the women's movement to advance an alternative discourse that defends the rights of women as those explicitly granted in the Qur'an, which are interpreted as complementary rather than equal to the rights of men (Adams, 2015). It has been difficult, therefore, to mitigate as a space where gender, national, and religious

identities coincide and co-exist as a modern, progressive, Bangladeshi, Muslim woman-hood.

**Intersectionality and the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity**

The term 'intersectionality' was coined to identify the diverse ways in which race and gender overlap to shape the multiple dimensions of black women's experiences in the workplace. Looking at academic discourse relating to the experiences of women of colour, Crenshaw explains that the intersectional identity of women and of color, often are marginalized within both, when these discourses represent only one or the other. Crenshaw (1991) describes a concept of multiple dimensions of one's social identity in her study on black women's employment experiences. As Audre Lorde (1984) described this intersectionality framework with her own experience: her "fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allow-ing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition" (pp. 120-121). The wholeness that Lorde describes corresponds with integrating multiple dimensions of identity and viewing how these systems interconnect (Abes, Jones and McEwen, 2007). The importance of intersectionality stems from the fact that it takes into account both race and gender as integral in shaping one's experiences. Of experiences of women of color, Crenshaw states, "are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism" (p. 1243). Alternatively, Crenshaw proposes intersectionality as a framework in the face of a systemic discrimination faced by those who suffer the result

of being doubly marginalized due having two or more marginalized identities and not to analyze how one mitigates these various identities as individuals.

To supplement the framework of Intersectionality, I will rely on Abes, Jones & McEwen's (2007) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity. The framework will explore the link between multiple dimensions of identity and meaning making i.e. the ability to perceive relationships between and among their multiple identities and noticing the tension between various dimensions. An early model of multiple dimensions of identity advanced by Jones and McEwen (2000), offers a conceptual representation of relationship among different socially constructed identity dimensions. They conclude that these different dimensions – race, sexual orientation, culture, gender, religion and social class – are experienced simultaneously, and thus cannot be fully studied nor comprehended when viewed in isolation. At the center of these intersecting social constructions of identity, is a core sense of psychological constructs, which Jones and McEwen lists with personal attributes, personal characteristics, and personal identity. Surrounding the core and identity dimensions, is the context in which an individual experiences life, such as family background, sociocultural conditions, current experiences and life planning. Abes, Jones and McEwen (2007) later reconceptualized this model of multiple dimensions of identity by incorporating a meaning-making filter. Taking into account Abes and Jones's (2004) study on college students' meaning-making capacity and how they perceive the relationships between their various social identity dimensions, a modified model of multiple dimensions of identity was formulated. This reconceptualized model incorporated how contextual factors are filtered through one's meaning-making capacity before influencing one's perception of the multiple identity dimensions. Abes, Jones and McEwen

(2007) summarized their justification for this re-conceptualized model based on findings from earlier studies, that "participants with complex meaning-making capacity were able, more so than those with less developed capacity, to filter contextual influences, such as family background, peer culture, social norms, and stereotypes, and determine how context influenced their identity" (p. 6). The researchers demonstrated how multiple dimensions of identity are refined through formulaic meaning making, transitional meaning making and foundational meaning making. Formulaic meaning-making filter is relatively simple, i.e. without the individual making their own meaning of contextual influences; whereas transitional meaning-making is relatively more complex with varying depths, and some contextual influences which are filtered through and reshaped, while other contextual influences retained their external connotations. In transitional meaning-making, the individual notices the tensions and conflicts within their identity. Finally, foundational meaning making denotes a much more complex relationship between context and perception of identity – contextual influences are reinterpreted and ascribed with one's own internal meaning. Foundational meaning making is characterized by "an ability to construct knowledge in a contextual world, an ability to construct an internal identity separate from external influences, and an ability to engage in relationships without losing one's internal identity" (Abes, Jones and McEwen, 2007).

This re-conceptualized model can provide helpful heuristics for analyzing and understanding how the complex nature of the various dimensions of identity and the social world we live in, interact influence one another (Patton, Renn, Guido, Quaye and Forney, 2016).

**Becoming: Subjectivity and Subjection**

While what we wear, our faith, and the language we speak are all inherently personal experiences, these experiences transcend into the public sphere by virtue of being carried by bodies which move into public spheres and become bearers of what Althusser (1970) describes as the Ideological State apparatuses, further explained in later chapters. In Bangladesh, and elsewhere, a woman's body is a marked body simply by virtue of being a woman's body. In the case of Muslim adolescent females who wear the *hijaab*, by virtue of veiled bodies, their bodies are even more so. Bannerji (1995) also refers to publicizing the private in her critique of Marxist-Feminism, "In this attempt to make "the private" public, lived social relations and forms of consciousness that constitute a personal, cultural, home life- all dubbed subjective, and there- fore phenomenal, remain outside of the purview of an analysis of class and capitalism." (p.76)

To expand on the theory of production and self-production as subjects, a third theme will draw on Judith Butler's interpretation of subjection i.e. the processes through which we are subjected, and actively take up as our own the terms of our subjection. "Subjection" signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power, as well as the process of becoming a subject. Butler (1997) differentiates between subjection and subordination in the quote below:

"The notion of power at work in subjection thus appears in two incommensurable temporal modalities: first, as what is for the subject always prior, outside of itself, and operative from the start; second, as the willed effect of the subject. This second modality carries at least two sets of meanings: as the willed effect of the subject,

subjection is a subordination that the subject brings on itself; yet if subjection produces a subject and a subject is the precondition of agency, the subjection is the account by which a subject becomes the guarantor of its resistance and opposition." (p.14)

Religiously and culturally based discourses (often related through a largely patriarchal prism), shape the way young Muslim girls are produced as subjects within Islamic school settings (Zine, 2008). Butler (1995) speaks of the paradoxical simultaneity of mastery and submission that constitutes the ambivalence of subjection.  This ambivalence can be translated and ascribed to the conflict that emerges specifically within individuals in an Islamic school setting in a country like Bangladesh, where traditional values have been in flux. Given the complex historical, social and cultural context of Bangladesh the research aims to recognize how bodies of Muslim girls are subjected within available discourses and thus become the selves we take them to be. This state of being active-while-acted-upon is what Butler would define as subjection. According to Butler, no individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected or undergoing "subjectivation" (a translation of the French *assujetissement*). Therefore, subordination functions as the necessary precondition for resistance and opposition. Subjection takes advantage of the desire for existence, where existence is always conferred from elsewhere; it marks a primary vulnerability to the Other, and of the other, in order to be. (Butler 1997, pp. 20–21). If young Muslim women come into existence, only as a result of being produced by various ideological state apparatus, i.e. education and religion, being produced as subordinates, then this social production is necessary for them to be able to come into existence.

Becoming entails the process of acquiring mastery of one's own terms of subjection. In my experience, I have come across young women, who use the mastery of religion to take control of their own experience and secure their positions as subjects. While this may be an act of submission, it also acts as a tool for their liberation. To cite an example of how the mastery of the terms of subjection becomes liberatory for the subject and a way in which one takes up the terms of subjection as their own, I refer to my first experience in walking into a single-sex, all female, madrasah mentioned previously. When we started the conversation, we asked them about science and language as subjects of interest. We spoke of English Language and Bengali and whether or not they had creative subjects in their curriculum and if they enjoyed them. They answered in muted voices. However, their postures changed, as they started speaking about religion. They became louder and more confident. This led me to think that they derive confidence from their knowledge in religion. While in terms mastery over other subjects by virtue of my social class, I was taking up more space than they were, religion was an area where they had acquired more mastery than I had, and by taking the terms of religion or religious knowledge, up as their own, they were securing the terms of their subjection.

To cite another example of taking up the terms of subjection, in an artwork produced for an exhibition titled "Slant: Tilted Perspectives", where in depicting a self-portrayal, one particular girl wrote 'Allah' in Arabic. On asking her why she sees herself in God, she replied, "God is in everything. I love God. I see him as part of myself and I see myself in him." This could be seen as a contradiction to the traditional views in Wahabi Islam and more along the lines of mystical teachings within Islam. But these mystical

thinkers are often written off as heretics who distort the 'true' Islam. This particular young woman, in adopting a hermeneutic approach to religious texts however dispels the notion of a single Truth. Hence, this particular self-portrayal is an example of how young women may postulate a critical understanding of their selves in light of religion, a clear indication of acquiring mastery over her terms of subjection.

In her study, Proweller (1998) points out that "[t]heorizing that students are simply shaped by available discourses has effectively denied youth culture agency over the processes of becoming 'somebody'.  In Zine's (2001) study she confers of one of her participants, "Negotiating the multiple aspects of her identity around ethnicity, nationality, and religion was necessary for Karima to become grounded in her identity as a Muslim." (p.404, Zine). The study also finds that, many times, multiple identities conflict, which can result in the "development of a double persona in which these youth are forced to develop one identity to deal with peer pressure at school and another to conform to the conflicting cultural demands of the home and community" (p. 406). While youth are en-tangled within various discursive arrangements in their social and cultural lives, they actively engage these positionings in ways that can disrupt and challenge the imposed discursive boundaries. At other times or in other ways, they may comply with the norma-tive standards made available to them.

# CHAPTER 3

## THE METHODOLOGY- AN INQUIRY INTO LIVED EXPERIENCES

"For an individual her knowledge in the immediate sense (which we call experience) is local and partial. But nonetheless it is neither false nor fantastic." (Banerji, p 86)

There is a surge of interest in the study of personal narrative, or life stories. One methodology that is used to study these stories is called narrative inquiry, which is rooted in sociology, anthropology, sociolinguistics, and second-wave feminism, and which is "flourishing" in the social sciences (Chase, 2005, p. 651). Traditionally, the analysis of the narratives collected or produced during narrative inquiry has received more scholarly attention than the process of actually writing these narratives (Conle, 2000). My thesis examines closely the concept of the social production of the other through employing two research methods:

a. writing storied poems about my experiences of working closely with adolescents in a Bangladeshi madrasah boarding school.

b. analyzing the artwork produced by two female students in response to the question, "How do you see yourself as a woman?"

The above methods will be supplemented by looking into a campaign on social media that captures lived experiences of the young women I aim to make the subjects of my research. Social media has come of age as a primary source, and there is tremendous opportunity for academics—and academic librarians—to begin treating it as such

(Coleman, 2018). However, in this case, since the girls did not participate in a video blog that I can use as a data source, I will be using a documented public conversation.

For the purpose of the research, adhering to the social constructivist approach as the overarching theme, the multiple-mode of identity theory will be used to explore how Muslim girls in madrasahs in Bangladesh conceptualize their own identities and Judith Butler's theory of Subjection will be used to analyze how they take up, as their own, the terms of their subjection. One method I will explore is how writing personal narratives or life stories can itself be an act of inquiry or research. Bannerji's (1995) framework will be used to expand on how personal experiences can be used to capture and create agency. I will expand on Bannerji's proposed framework of subjective storied experience through Judith Butler's theory of subjection to analyze my own experience in taking up, as my own, the terms of my subjection in relation to my field experiences captured in a storied poem and through how the artwork of the young woman, gives her the agency to take up the terms of her subjection.

Given the lack of student voices in Bangladeshi literature, it is difficult to know how students take up the terms of their subjection. The literature is even sparser in case of madrasahs. An ideal method, to explore the question would reveal the nuances of the intersections of multiple dimensions in the identities of adolescent girls in Bangladeshi madrasahs, through discovering their identities and how they view themselves from the experiences they share (Creswell, 2012). In order to ensure the representation of student voices, I had initially designed a methodology using primary data collected through a combination of art-voice, participant observation, interviews and journaling. However, when an application was sent to the Research Ethics Board (REB) seeking approval,

the board reported that there "are a number of issues that need clarification, particularly regarding the potential risks before a decision can be made". In my application I had mentioned that I had been working with the institutions for over three years at that point in time and the school administration and the teachers trust the researcher to not cause them any harm. The REB elaborated their concerns with the following:

"Will the researcher be able to maintain an unbiased position and report honestly on what is found, given that "no harm" should be done to the school?  It seems the researcher cannot promise no harm to the school when, in fact, the re searcher is provoking the girls to think about conflicts between what they are taught and what they see/hear from elsewhere.

d) It will be important to obtain un coerced assent from the girls, given their past contact with the researcher and the pressure from the administration who it's stated will select the girls and act as the guardian who give consent. These ado-lescent girls, as with all Bangladeshi girls and women, are unlikely to have expe-rienced much autonomy and decision making in the past. It's concerning to hear that the school administration will 'convince the guardians'. Will you have direct contact with the parent? Please address how you can ensure the parent and the girls truly want to participate."

Following the review, I had submitted a revised application. However, my justifi-cations and assurances were deemed insufficient. Therefore, I had to switch gears to use secondary data and use my 'biases' to an advantage by engaging in an auto-ethno-graphic study of the field experiences through a poetic inquiry. The main research ques-tion, however, remains,  how adolescents girls in Bangladeshi madrasahs conceptualize

their *own* identities as Muslim Bengali women. So, the majority of the data used, although from secondary sources, have been produced by the students themselves, and serves to check the problem of representation of student voices.

To explore the students' conceptualization of self-perception, emphasis must be placed on storied experiences. I will incorporate methods to capture my own storied experiences as it relates to theirs. Since the research deals with the conceptualization of one's own identity in relation to the other, a combination of feminist epistemology and a constructivist epistemology is appropriate in guiding the theoretical framework. General discourses frequently leave out the formation of the 'subject' in relation to the researchers'.

The current literature explores the socio-political madrasah based sector only in the light of preventing extremism or counter terrorism perspectives. Lived experiences are entirely missing from this literature, particularly in speaking for lived experiences of adolescent girls. Bannerji (1995) points to the role of personal experiences in capturing knowledge. Feminist theory serves as an 'active knowledge' that accommodates for the personal as encoded in its slogan "the personal is political" (p. 65). However, for it to fully function as active, it needs to incorporate, a more subjective, personal knowledge that is representative of the other, particularly women of color. Bannerji (1995) uses feminist theory as a starting point to emphasize that "integrative reflexive analysis to work out a political position which allows anyone to speak for/from the experience of individuals while leaving room to speak socially from other locations, along the lines of relations that inform our own experiences" (p.84) is necessary. She proposes a social analysis that begins with "subjectivity, which asserts dynamic, contradictory and unresolved di-

mensions of experience and consequently does not reify itself into a fixed psychological category called identity, which rigidifies an individual's social experience with her environment and history" (p. 88).

This study aims to serve as a starting point for the kind of social analysis that Bannerji proposes and will fulfill an existing knowledge gap as well as open doors for future conversations. Even though, capturing the wholesome lived experiences of the students is beyond the scope of this research, the data sources used will serve as a window into the psyche of the girls. Since the conceptual framework relies heavily on Judith Butler's theory of Subjection and Abes, Jones & McEwen's (2007) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, and focuses on exploring the link between multiple dimensions of identity and meaning making, narrative inquiry as a proposed methodology should help understand how students conceptualize their own identities. The conceptual framework will help explore how they form their own self perceptions in lieu of socio-cultural, political and religious contexts in addition to making clear how they actively take up the terms of their subjection as a result of multiple meaning making.

Increasingly, educational research warns that the more traditional, textual descriptions of qualitative findings fail to adequately reflect the complexity of studying human behavior. Ethical issues of voice and relationship to which researchers have become more sensitive, or permit the possibility of multiple interpretations that the postmodern world has come to accept are also left unaddressed. So, researchers have turned to narrative approaches advocated by Connelly and Clandinin (1990), Lawrence Lightfoot (1983), Reissman (1993), and Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992), positing that narrative is a human way of thinking the way people make sense of their worlds and

construct their identities (Bruner, 1987). This includes auto-ethnographic narratives where, in reporting narratives, an auto-ethnographic account provides information on the researcher's own "voice, stance, assumptions and analytic lens so that the reader is abundantly clear on whose story is whose" (Connolly, 2007, p.453). This form of inquiry requires that researchers situate themselves in their studies and work intimately with their participants. In so doing, they create relationships that help to ensure that participant voices and perspectives are respected and reported (Butler-Kisber, 2002).

Both contextualizing and categorizing analytic strategies (Maxwell & Miller, 1992) is used by narrative inquirers in their work. While contextualizing approaches perceive the contiguous, storied dimensions of "field texts" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to create narratives (Reissman, 1993), categorizing is the search for patterns in interview, observational, and documentation field texts (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). For the purpose of this research, contextualization will be used to judge the veracity of the narrative by its persuasiveness, whether the interpretation is reasonable and convincing (Riessman, 1993), in order to allow others to take away from what Donmoyer (1990) refers to as 'the particular', parts which resonate with broader experiences and use these understandings to enhance educational practices in other settings.

The last decade has seen a burgeoning interest in stretching the boundaries of narrative, reporting in research to include other literary genres (reader's theatre, poetry, drama, musical drama, and hypertext), as well as non-textual or visual modes of representation (collage, quilts, portraits, drawings, photographs, film, and video). Including arts-based representation in qualitative research is rationalized by the reasoning that form mediates understanding. McNiff (1998) defined art-based research as the follow-

ing:

> "Art-based research can be defined as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies." (p.29)

On a methodological level, "arts-based practices have been developed for all research phases: data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation "(Leavy, 2009, p. 12). There are many diverse arts-based methods in use, and arts-based researchers are hesitant to prescribe methods. Some arts-based researchers, such as a/r/tographer Rita Irwin, have argued that arts-based research should constitute its own research paradigm separate from quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Andrews, 2009).

The rationale behind using a myriad of art-based research practices is that our understanding of a particular phenomenon can be qualitatively changed by different forms (Eisner, 1991; Langer, 1953). Also, these nontraditional forms disrupt the hegemony inherent in traditional texts and evoke emotional responses that bring the reader/viewer closer to the work, permitting otherwise silenced voices to be heard (Denzin, 1997). This is leading to a growing consensus among many qualitative researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) that these new ways of doing inquiry will contribute positively to existing educational practices.

Interest in art-based research has increased exponentially as these approaches have become accepted and legitimized. Barone and Eisner (1997) have enumerated seven features of arts-based work which include "the creation of a virtual reality", "the

presence of ambiguity", "the use of expressive language", "the use of contextualized and vernacular language", "the promotion of empathic understanding", "the use of the personal signature of the author", and "the presence of aesthetic form" (pp. 73-83). While these qualities have the capacity to pull the reader/viewer into a world that is recognizable enough to be credible, they are ambiguous enough to allow new insights and meanings to emerge. The methodology makes possible the potential for positive change in education through a combination of accessible language, and a product that promotes empathy and vicarious participation.

An extension of art-based inquiry is poetic inquiry, which is a term that describes the use of both poetic and creative thinking to analyze and draw conclusions in research, as well as a way of understanding and communicating the subject matter being studied. Poetic inquiry can serve as a method of giving a voice back to scientific research that risks being lost through the application of traditional scientific analysis, as the richness and experience of the people being studied are reduced to numerical data.

Through the use of qualitative research and poetic inquiry, research can begin to connect empathically and understand more complex psychosocial processes (Furman, 2006). To use poetic inquiry in research is to incorporate poetry in some way as an analytical device, whether in data collection, as a tool to view data in unique ways that can help yield new insight, or as a way of representing findings to peers and the general public. Using poetic inquiry as an analytical device can help bring focus to ideas and data that are most relevant to the research. The process of writing poetry or thinking poetically about the inquiry process helps us to collect the most relevant themes and phrases out of the sea of information available to us.

Poems can be gathered from specific groups to describe ethnographic data. They can be used as an interview tool, written by participants as answers to questions, or they can be the subject of study. Poetic inquiry tends to belong to one of the following categories, distinguished by the voice that is engaged:

A. Literature-voiced poems written from or in response to works of literature/theory.

B. Researcher-voiced poems framed in a research context which use field notes, journal entries, or reflective/ creative/ autobiographical/ auto-ethnographic writing as a data source;

C. Participant-voiced poems written from interview transcripts or solicited directly from participants, sometimes in an action research model, where the poems are co-created with the researcher (Prendergast and Sameshima, 2009a).

For the purposes of my inquiry, I will be using a researcher-voiced poem i.e. a poem I have written myself based on my field experiences as a piece of reflective writing, i.e. a researcher voiced poem as an auto ethnographic data source, in conjunction with a piece of artwork produced by a female adolescent student in a madrasah. My reason for choosing art-based inquiry and poetic techniques as research methods is to honor the whole person by providing representation preserving the person's essence. I plan to engage the use of poetry and artwork in my qualitative research to help develop a more holistic approach to an inquiry into lived experiences and broaden understanding of how human motivation and experience influence the many aspects of life. It is in this creative exploration of human nature and the gathering and interpretation of poetic and artistic responses to a situation or environment that I seek to engage in.

However, I am aware that a delicate balance must be struck between supporting and widening the exciting opportunities these approaches offer and making sure the in-roads that have been gained in arts-based research are not lost because of inadequate work. There is the danger of creating elitism in the field if doors close for some and not others. With these issues in mind, Barone and Eisner (1997) have suggested that:

> **"**Researchers will need to develop both technical and artistic skills, and schools of education will need to make both human and material resources available to enable them to do so. Material resources pertain to both equipment and space studios. Human resources refer to staff members or faculty who themselves are able to help students acquire such skills. Schools now provide such resources, of course, to develop the technical skills of statistics and computers. Computer lab-oratories are available in which students can refine the skills that they have ac-quired in their use. We are suggesting an expansion of what learning to do edu-cational research requires." (p. 92)

It is these recommendations that guide my chosen combination of narrative in-quiries to answer my research question. To supplement the data gathered primarily from my narrative inquiry methods, I will be using some secondary sources from social media to further shed light on the lived experiences of adolescents in Bangladeshi madrasahs.

In what follows, I will be engaging in a thorough analysis of the social production of the other through reading Himani Bannerji (1995), followed by thematic analysis of the concept of otherness through my poetic inquiry, disintegrating my generated poem (Stein, 2003). Much like Mark Freeman's Chapter, "Narrative Inquiry" in Introduction to Arts–Based Research begins with the author's own story of turning to narrative (Leavy,

2017). I will use a poem as a storied experience one of my own poems produced based on my field experiences with twelve to fourteen year olds in one boarding school in Dhaka as an entry point into my methods of inquiry. I hope to uncover through my method of inquiry the broad theme of social production of the other using the theoretical premises of Himani Bannerji (1995), while exploring feminism as the underlying theme. Bannerji's framework will be used to expand on how personal experiences can be used to capture and create agency. I will expand on Bannerji's proposed framework of subjective storied experience through Judith Butler's theory of subjection to analyze my own experience in taking up, as my own, the terms of my subjection.

My exploration of social production and subjection will continue with storied experiences that explore two pieces of artwork that was produced by the girls themselves. The Multiple Dimensions of Identity Model (Abes, Jones and McEwen, 2009) will be used particularly at this point of uncovering storied experiences, to make sense of how the artwork reflects relative salience of multiple identities of the girls, and in particular their meaning making filters. The combination of methods will function as an integrative reflexive social analysis to capture the dynamic, contradictory, unresolved human experience.

# CHAPTER 4

# UNCOVERING STORIED EXPERIENCES

"For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the "we" except by finding the way in which I am tied to "you," by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know." (Butler, 2003, p. 36)

## My Becoming: A personal poetic inquiry through a generated poem

As discussed, I will engage in an inquiry through analysis of two pieces of data sources. The first is a poetic inquiry of one of my own poems written soon after as a self-reflective exercise informed by the narratives of the girls about abuse and marginalization they have encountered during the course of their lives. The second method is an analysis of one piece of visual art produced as a self-reflective exercise by a fourteen year old female student in a single-sex aliya madrasah.

The following poem, titled "Disappearing into Darkness", is a depiction of subjectivity that reflects some dimensions of my own experiences, derived from those of the female students in aliya madrasahs, of growing up in oppressive, patriarchal societies where bodies are battlegrounds through and on which  the process of becoming occurs, through generated poetry. Generated poetry encompasses writing poetry about person-

al experiences that may be 'metaphorically generalizable' (Stein, 2003). It is generated poetry in the sense that it uses metaphors to symbolize oppression of the female gender which can be generalized to those who are being produced as the "Other" gender. While the experiences described in the poem are not my own, I have had relatable experiences as a result of growing up in a deeply patriarchal society.

*Disappearing Into Darkness*

*I can feel myself shrinking.*

*Not sure when it started.*

*Maybe it was the day I became a woman.*

*But isn't becoming*

*supposed to feel like unshrinking?*

*Then why do I feel like*

*Being trapped in a cage*

*my childhood disappearing into darkness*

*I was 12.*

*When I started to become a woman*

*Was I a woman already?*

*When it started?*

*I don't know where he first saw me*

*Maybe it was at the market with my mother*

*while I was musing over an earring I would wear*

*on ears that I cover with my scarf*

*Lest they provoke*

*Maybe it was when I was walking back home*

*with my friends from school,*

*careful not to laugh too loud*

*Lest it provokes*

*Afraid, clad in all black*

*my body disappearing into darkness*


*It started with his shadows, heeling mine, as he was following me*

*Then phone calls at odd hours*

*LAN phones ringing during odd hours*

*Silence broken with sounds of heavy breathing*

*Then he started speaking*

*Making propositions that left a bitter taste in my mouth*

*Feeling filthy, I was disappearing into darkness*


*It didn't stop there*

*He came over with his friend*

*To my home, supposedly safe*

*He threatened my family that he would take me away, whether I was ready or not,*

*Return my semblances to my safe place in devalued parts*

*"If he does take her away? If he carries out his threat?*

*Who will marry her then?"*

*My family, fearful for my future*

*Sent me away*

*To this madrasah*

*So I would be safe*

*But I, suffocate.*

*Everyday, five times, I respond to the call for prayer*

*Prostrating before my Creator, asking for respite*

*But I find none*

*As I continue disappearing into darkness*

*Deported to this new abode, supposedly safe,*

*amongst other girls, barely living*

*I learn to lower my gaze, cover my face,*

*"Oh you are so pretty! No wonder they look at you like that."*

*But I feel  ugly,*

*Drowning in shame and misery,*

*I continue to disappear into darkness*

*I keep it covered now, this tool of the devil, my face*

*I must not provoke*

*But it doesn't stop*

*Different people, same ploys*

*They keep making me feel naked*

*Open for the taking*

*So I wish, I wish I could be*

*disappearing into darkness.*


*Boys wait on balconies to take pictures of my uncovered face in the sly*

*Bullying me into submitting to their inappropriate proposals*

*Threatening to upload my devil's tool on websites if I don't comply.*

*The CNG driver winks and makes gross gestures*

*On the few occasions I manage to sneak out for fresh air*

*and  look at earrings I so used to love*

*When I touch the earrings now,*

*That disgusting shopkeepers' hands will touch mine,*

*Followed by a pursing of his chapped lips, and ugly noises I wish I could turn deaf to*

*And be disappearing into darkness.*


*So I throw myself onto my prayer mat*

*Asking to be saved*

*Begging to be forgiven for enticing*

*For this is my sin to bear*

*I feel myself shrinking away, burdened with sinfulness*

*As I continue to*

*At a time, wishing and worrying*

*That I may*

*disappear into darkness.*


The poem was written as a performative piece written for 'It's a She Thing', which is a local production of the Vagina monologues based on semi-structured interviews with adolescents in an aliya madrasah in Dhaka about their stories of abuse. Much of it is a reflection of my own thoughts and experiences on being produced as an 'Other' (in relation to man) in a patriarchal society while taking up the terms of my own subjection. Here, I position myself as becoming a knower-subject, as Bannerji defines it, i.e. "It is a (woman) subject's immediate and lived (as interpreted) experience of herself and the world she happens to be in which she simultaneously positions her as a knower-subject and a social object of research." (p. 87)

The poem depicts a girl's journey and becoming a woman which, to her, feels like disappearing. It is a very surface level look into the lives of a girl who, as a result of being frequently harassed, is forced to leave her home and move to a boarding school madrasah. The poem is a commentary on the social constraints that are placed on young women in patriarchal societies. In some societies the constraints are more rigid that than others. It comments on how a girls' safety is seen to be her burden to bear i.e. she is held accountable for her own safety, and by default, if she is in an unsafe situa-

tion, society is quick to place the blame of her misfortune on her. Often she is made responsible for sexual harassment that she is subjected to. Her 'becoming' feels like shrinking because as she grows into a woman, society places many restrictions on her. She becomes a victim of society, ends up sacrificing her dreams for the kind of life she wants in order to appease her parents who want to protect her from unwarranted sexual advances. In time, she begins to internalize the narrative of the society, that her being beautiful is seen as an invitation enough to warrant explicit consent. In the end she turns to her God, with feelings of hopelessness, anger and pain, asking to be saved. She asks for forgiveness for being 'enticing' and prays to disappear, so she does not have to deal with unwarranted sexual attention anymore.

The deeply patriarchal roots of Bangladeshi society mandate that the first thing we consciously or subconsciously ask about a rape or sexual harassment incident is the extent to which the victim herself can be held responsible for her own rape. This is usually done by qualifying the status of victimhood by imposing what Norwegian criminologist, Nils Christie (1986) has coined as "ideal victim". He defined the ideal or "perfect" victim as "a person or category of individuals who…most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim". Rape victims who do not conform to this standard (by for instance, transgressing what we perceive to be the ideal role of women in society and public life) are victim-blamed and largely denied the status of victimhood. Elaborating on the picture perfect victim Huda (2017) asserts:

> An example of who would be considered an ideal victim in our culture is a woman who only leaves the house during the day, out of necessity, while modestly dressed and preferably with a male guardian. In imposing this

standard, we end up asking immaterial questions about the victim when we should instead be inquiring about the rapist(s). Who was she with? What was she doing? What was she wearing? Why was she there in the first place? In other words: did the woman do all she could to avoid getting raped or did she essentially bring it on herself?

Even though the girls based on whose experiences the storied poem was written would fall into the ideal victim category, it is understandably difficult to not engage in self-blame when one is subjected to sexual harassment as a result of being constantly subjected to the narrative of "Why you?".

It is important to shed light on the context in which the poem was generated. As part of an exercise conducted in 2016 to understand their lived experiences better in order to provide adequate psychosocial support, some students from an aliya madrasah in Dhaka were brought together in a group discussion where they were made part of a conversation about times when they felt violated. The girls poured out stories about being harassed by public transport drivers, boys who studied in an adjacent school, street vendors etc. Some harassment occurred in the form of lewd gestures while some were in the form of inappropriate propositions over phone calls. The girls also expressed discomfort at being made part of these institutions, often not by choice. One girl expressed how she was enrolled in the madrasah as a result of being harassed by a local goon, as a safety measure. Her parents thought it was unsafe for her to be at home and enrolled her in the institution which had a perceived safety value attached to it. This is supported by research from Badrunnesha & Kwauk (2015) as previously cited. Madrasah education has become the favored form of schooling for the more religiously minded commu-

nities in the country. The increased popularity is a result of a desire to protect social values and a concern for safety. Parents from all socio-economic backgrounds are choosing to send their daughters to madrasahs as opposed to regular schools based on the belief that madrasas are safer for girls, which is an institutional expression of ongoing gendered-based violence in the country.

While the poem is written as though it is one person's storied experience, it is in fact a combination stories of multiple girls enrolled in the institutions, bits and pieces of whose experiences have been interwoven into one poem. These stories were then pieced together to form one storied poem guided by thoughts acquired from my own experiences as Muslim woman growing up in the same broader patriarchal society, albeit not schooled in the same system as them. The poem captures their experiences of suffering as a result of being produced as an 'Other' in a patriarchal system where bodies are subjected to violences and bodies are blamed, both internally and externally, for violences done to them; sufferings which speak to many women's experiences across the world.

Said (2004) brings to attention how any text about the Orient is always exterior to the object it describes i.e. the Orient itself. There are no "natural depictions" of the Orient, there are only representations of it. What is important in this observation is that "these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient" (p. 22). This means that Orientalist texts are always more about the West than about the Orient. It is not only fair to acknowledge how my poem is also a representation of the reality and is not necessarily a "natural depiction" of the institution, since neither is it de-

rived from my direct experience, nor is it written by a student at the institution. It is more about me than about them. It is my interpretation of their realities.

The storied experience depicted in the poem was not one that any one girl had consciously offered during the group discussions. Bits and pieces of it were scattered over several lives and several experiences, and it came to life in applying an adaptation of Mishler's (1992) "chained narrative" approach. In chained narrative, the researcher distills episodes of a participant's story from transcripts and then arranges these temporally from the origins, to its turning point, and conclusion. My analysis of the girls' embedded narrative produced a contiguous version of text that resulted in the poem. The poem attempts to reveal the textures of girls' lived experiences, missing in more conventional reporting styles, so richly conveyed during my conversations with them, or the poignancy of their stories, or the empathy I hoped to depict because it generated a resonance as defined by Conle (1996) with my—and what I imagine were other women's—experiences:

> "Resonance is a process of dynamic, complex, metaphorical relations. It is not confined to one single strand of connections. It is a complex relationship among many aspects of a story. Associations can be made through its images, its mood, its moral associations, and more. The resonance process is complex and covers a wide range of cognitive and non-cognitive elements." (p. 313)

Creating poetry is not a linear process. As in any type of writing, it was necessary to reshape it over time. Reading the work aloud many times facilitated changes. I experimented with the words to create rhythms, pauses, emphasis, breath-points, syntax, and diction. While the conversations were had in Bangla, the poem is written in English. So

the words and experiences were loosely translated and synthesized to create one storied poem.

In speaking of performativity, it is imperative that I acknowledge that my poem is performative of my own lived experience. Much like Wiebe (2008), I consider my poetic inquiry as performative of my lived experience because it is 'giving me the opportunity to construct and "perform" my self in different ways'. Through writing storied poems I am experiencing a process similar to the one that she suggests is experienced by Brandt's and Toews' narrators (e.g., Wiebe, 2008b, 2008c) in Mennecostal Musings (Wiebe, 2008) i.e. the process of reshaping one's sense of self through writing about life experiences. Norman Denzin observes that "a good performance text must be more than cathartic—it must be political, moving people to action, reflection or both" (2003, p.xi). I have come to the realization that my poems are performative texts because writing and performing them moves me to think more deeply or differently about my self and my past, my present, my identities as well as my writing-research practices.

Therefore, my poetry, in being performative, and hence a continual process, facilitates my own becoming. Since we exist only in relation to others, my becoming is a continuous process that is resultant of and in relation to the girls' becoming. The process of becoming must remain unresolved and incomplete in order for it to function as the starting point for social analysis. Even though my becoming was made necessary to justify the existence of the Other, my existence neither adding or subtracting any value in the spatial temporal world, as I begin taking up as my own the terms of my subjection I claim agency of my subjection. In exploring my embodied experience through an

auto-ethnographic poetic inquiry, I engage in the dynamic, contradictory, and incomplete recounting of subjectified storied experience to produce knowledge that is truly active.

Bannerji (1995) stresses that knowledge can only be 'active' or oriented in social change, through the critical practice of direct producers, whose lives and experiences must be the basis for their knowledge making endeavours (p. 65), which storied experiences attempt to do. In my poem, I try to capture the experience of becoming "the Other" i.e. a woman, as produced by patriarchy. Butler would define this process as taking up, as our own, the terms of our subjection or in other words, becoming:

"The temporal paradox of the subject is such that, of necessity, we must lose the perspective of a subject already formed in order to account for our own becoming. That "becoming" is no simple or continuous affair, but an uneasy practice of repetition and its risks, compelled yet incomplete, wavering on the horizon of social being." (Butler, 1997, p. 14)

As a feminist, I believe bodies that are subjected to violence are never at fault of having violence done to them. In my understanding of Islam, men and women have been created as equals. However, patriarchal interpretations of Islam have resulted in women being seen as the 'Other.' This produces noticeable tension between my Muslim identity and my feminist identity. For the students in this particular institution, the point at which the stories were collected out of which the poem emerged, there was no strong sense of a feminist identity. However, there was sense of injustice and violence that their bodies were being subjected to.

There is no question that this poem is my interpretation of the girls' stories and as a result of my own experiences and embedded narratives. I have used my own mean-

ing-making filter resultant of my experiences of having lived in the West, been part of a colonial education system, exposed to the Western world through media, my relationship with my religion to make meaning of my experiences – all interwoven with the girls in the storied poem. In speaking of my experience as 'the new Orient', an intersectional temporal space, I inhabit a colonized body that wears orientalism and speaks the colonial tongue. Engaging in a more personal inquiry I take up, as my own, the terms of my subjection, through which I have come to be in order to create knowledge which provides an approximation of our internal and external reality.

In using the girls' stories to create a poem, some of my own embodied experience as a Bengali, Muslim woman, who has been and is being educated in a colonial education system, speaking the colonial language, learning a colonial history while wearing her skin and her hijab as symbols of the orient is recreated. I refuse to lose perspective of what was already formed i.e. the colonial imprints that result in my embodied intersectionality, in order to account for my becoming. And it is with this perspective that I acknowledge the tone of the poem, that reeks of victimhood, as part my saviour complex that may be a result of the guilt I experience as having colonial neurolinguistic imprints on my body. My subjectification is a continual process that occurs multiple times in multiple ways. My process of becoming occurs through the acknowledgement and ownership of my subjectification. Therefore, my becoming is also a continual, unsteady, process, where I must come to terms with, and take up the terms of my subjection multiple times.

By acknowledging my own colonial history, my gender, religious, and my national identities, their meanings, and the parts of myself that I bring into my research, I also

notice the conflict that these multiple dimensions of my identities produce in myself, result in complex ways of meaning making. In particular, the parts of the poem that refer to "throwing myself onto my prayer mat" and "asking to be saved, I notice the way my Muslim identity is in collusion with my feminist identity.

There is still significant discussion and debate in qualitative research about the appropriation of stories and question, whether it is ethical for researchers to tell participants' stories. In response, I have attempted to acknowledge authentically that the lens through which I interpret the data is a result of my own lived experience which serves as a mere entry point into the lives of the girls. In addition, during my ongoing interactions with the girls, they have frequently voiced their desires to have their stories told. It reinforces their sense of self when they feel heard. They think it is important for others to hear, but not one they always feel comfortable telling themselves. While my poem is but an interpretation of their lived experience, it is a fair interpretation I believe, as a result of the close interactions that evolved between us, and by the richness of human activity including more art based work such as reflexive poetry and art exercises that the girls themselves engaged in and allowed to be part of over the years. Some of the artwork will be analyzed in the following sections to strengthen the voice of those who are the main subjects of the research in this thesis to better account for how adolescents in Bangladeshi madrasahs conceptualize their *own* identities as Muslim Bengali women.

**Your Becoming: Listening to Voices through painting of Sorrow and Hope**

*Of Sorrow*

So far, I have engaged in a theoretical analysis of one of my poems derived from the girls' experiences, by presenting my storied poem as a method of inquiry into the girl's lived experiences. I have alluded to my interpretations of the girls' lived experiences and thoughts that have led to the production of my storied poems and situated my poem in scholarly research. While some narrative researchers doing similar work prefer to leave interpretation and analysis to their audience, in part "to disrupt the politics of traditional research relationships, traditional forms of representation, and traditional social science orientations to audiences" (Chase, 2005, p. 660) I have provided context for my poetic method as well as context in which the poem was produced. In what follows, I will supplement my poetic inquiry with the second data source, i.e. a piece of artwork that was produced by one of the female students at the institution.

The artwork was produced as part of an art exhibition titled "Slant: Tilted Perspectives." Themed around Women's Day 2016, girls from a single-sex aliya madrasah in Dhaka were asked to illustrate how they viewed themselves as women. The objective was to showcase the diversity within the community, as well as part of a self-reflective exercise where the students were asked to delve deep into conceptualizing their identities. A day-long art workshop was conducted at the madrasah where 57 girls participated and created various images to show how they viewed themselves as women. Most representations were in the form of objects and non-human figures, as drawing human figures is seen as sinful and frowned upon within conservative interpretations of Islam.

15 pieces of artwork produced by girls from the madrasahs were displayed in an art exhibition the following week. Each piece of art was accompanied by an artist statement of a few lines explaining why the artist produced the image they did in the self-reflective exercise.

Among the 16 pieces displayed, one that stood out to me was titled 'Trapped.' The artist statement with the artwork was as follows:

"I see myself as a bird trapped in a cage because I cannot find my freedom, I can't go anywhere, do anything, I feel like a trapped bird all the time. In reality I want to fly, I want to get out of the cage but no one lets me out."

The sentiments that have been captured in the statement include sorrow, helplessness, and ambition. Boarding school madrasahs are spaces known to be restricted, where beating a child is a common disciplinary measure. At the point at which the exhibition took place, residential students at the institution were not allowed to venture outside the physical confines of the madrasah. There were also accounts of the students being discouraged to pursue ambitious careers in music, art, science or technology as engaging in career pursuits were seen as conflicting with the tenants and principles of Islam. It is not surprising, in such circumstances, that one may feel like a caged bird.

Adhering to social constructivist theory as a grounding concept, the production of the student's self-concept through the artwork is not absolute. She defines no set of attributes that are necessary to its identity and function in her self-portrayal. While this particular piece of artwork does not say anything about her relationship with wider narratives of feminism and Islam in the nationalist narrative of Bangladesh, it is not far-fetched to assume that given the broader historical context, like other women of faith

and poor women, she has felt alienated in society. Gender norms in these institutions also dictate that she has less freedom than her male counterparts. While boys are allowed to roam free outside of their boarding schools, girls are not allowed to do so. While male participation in economic, social and political spheres, beyond religious spheres is not discouraged, women do not have the same luxury. In addition, traditional Islamic discourses do not accommodate for female religious leaders which may lead her to feel 'trapped'.

'Trapped' may well be a physical, as well as a metaphorical condition, for this particular young woman whereby she feels trapped within the institution's physical premises as well as trapped in her own body as a female, produced as 'an Other' in patriarchal religious discourses, largely narrated through a lens that doesn't accommodate for her. In nationalist discourses as well, socio-economically poor aliya madrasahs having evolved from Urdu-based institutions that have been seen as breeding ground for terrorism and anti-state sentiments in Bangladesh, have been produced as the Other. In addition, feminist discourses in Bangladesh, heavily influenced by Western feminism and secular nationalism has produced the woman of faith as the oppressed Other. From the social constructivist perspective, therefore, her identity has been constructed in ways that have led her to feel 'trapped'.

For the artist, the contextual influences on her identity include her family, peers, religion, gender and nationality. Within her social context, she feels trapped and unable to find her freedom. While it is not clear what particular contextual influences is leading her to identify herself as 'Trapped', since the artwork was produced in response to the instruction, 'Describe how you see yourselves as women' it is likely that her response

took most strongly into consideration her gender identity as a woman. Her production and subjection, therefore, is mostly as a result of being a woman within her contextual influences. The data does not say anything about the relative salience of her identities, i.e. which of her multiple identities is most important to her. It only makes a statement about the contexts within which she operates. To her, to be a woman within her social context, is to be oppressed and trapped.

It is difficult to come to concrete conclusions from the data about whether or not and how she is forming her social identity in relation to others, whether she is using the Multiple Dimensions of Identity theory's meaning making filter at all, or how complex her meaning-making capacity is. Jones and McEwen found in their study of a group of ten women college students, ranging in age from 20-24 years and of diverse racial-ethnic backgrounds, contextual influences that emerged as significant included race, culture, gender, family, education, relationships with those different from oneself, and religion. The core category also reflects the finding that identity was defined and understood as having multiple intersecting dimensions. The particular salience of identity dimensions depended upon the contexts in which they were experienced.

Given the high possibility that the artist has taken into account the contextual influences, she is led to feel trapped. The data indicates that she has moved beyond formulaic meaning-making where she is not making meaning of contextual influences. However, to say that her meaning-making style is foundational may be a far-cry. It is unclear whether she can clearly distinguish contextual influences from her perception of her identity. Therefore, it seems that her meaning-making is more transitional in nature, it is relatively more complex with varying depths, and some contextual influences are

filtered through reshaping, while other contextual influences retained their external connotations. However, whether or not she notices the tensions and conflicts within their identity, remains unclear.

When considering environmental influences on intersectionality and student identity, it is important to consider not only the school environment, but also students' identity development– both their self-perceptions and their developmental capacity to understand and filter the messages they receive from the context of their environment. We can say, that while her meaning-making filter is not completely formulaic, it is not foundational either. Since she is not actively noticing the tensions between her identities, it is likely that while her meaning making is more transitional, it is closer to being more formulaic than foundational.

This is not surprising in adolescents when what Erikson (1970) defines as Identity Cohesion vs. Role Confusion in his Eight stages of Development theory. During this period, adolescents form their self-image and endure the task of resolving the crisis of their basic ego identity. If successful resolution of the crisis does not occur through previous developmental stages, revolving around issues such as trust, autonomy, and initiative, individuals become conflicted about which identity to ground themselves in.

As part of the immersive process that I have chosen to adopt as part of my methodology, I must engage in some reflection as to why this particular piece of poetry stood out to me. I believe, the experience of feeling 'trapped' is one almost all of us have felt at some point in life. I believe the language of sadness, or hopelessness, much like the language of love, can be a universal language. My own experience of feeling trapped has been as a result of a confusion created by my multiple identities. There

have been moments of unresolved tensions between different parts of my identity leading me to feel trapped by one or more of them, identities that are mostly a result of social construction. Freedom, as desired by me, as desired by her, is a universally coveted.

What is interesting about the artwork though, is the fact that by producing the artwork, using words like 'in reality, I want to fly', the young woman is taking up terms of her own subjection. Her subordination, as female and a woman of faith in a highly patriarchal religious discourse and institutions governed and dominated by men, functions as the necessary precondition for resistance and opposition. Her mode of resistance is engaging in art. Her opposition is her statement that she wants to fly. Her oil pastel colours in shades of blue green, red and yellow are weapons she is using to liberate and re-produce herself and become. A double process of becoming subordinated by power as well as becoming a subject of power, occurs which entails the process of acquiring mastery of her subject i.e. art and of her own terms of subjection. She displays no rejection of any set of values. Therefore, her mastery is gained in being part of an institution, internalizing cultural and religious discourses that make her feel 'trapped'.

According to Althusser (1970), modes of identification, i.e. social identities, can function as an ideological state apparatus. Superstructures which include culture and ideology work, use ideological state apparatus, that belong to the private domain of society i.e. churches, schools, families, etc. which reinforce the rule of the dominant class, principally through ideology. In being a combination of schools and 'churches' or in this case, schools and mosques in the public domain in Bangladesh, madrasahs serve as significant Ideological State Apparatus, making people submit out of fear of social

ridicule rather than fear of legal prosecution or police violence, instead of expressing and imposing order, through repression. Particularly in the case of madrasahs that are state sponsored, which integrate religion and education, could function as extremely useful ideological apparatus for the state. Albeit, the sociopolitical context of Bangladesh and its founding principles on liberal socialism are grounded in secular values. This position is complicated and the Ideological State apparatus in a patriarchal society is as repressive as the repressive State apparatus for the girl child.

Subjection to power involves the internalization of norms i.e. her adhering to the rules of the institution, gender norms imposed by society, patriarchal interpretations of religion that she has been taught. This process of internalization forms the psyche in that it "fabricates the distinction between interior and exterior life". This formation is equivalent to the emergence of reflexivity, the capacity of self-reflection that opposes and transforms the desire, power and norms that constitute it, as she does with her self-reflective artwork. While norms are preserved through the formative action of power, this process of subordination also constitutes agency and hence the ability to subvert the conditions of one's production. Through her artwork, she actively engages with her process of subordination by producing herself as a victim, devoid of all power, while simultaneously using her artwork as a transgressive tool.

In her book 'Teaching to Transgress', bell hooks promotes the idea of engaged pedagogy i.e. fair dialogue, critical questioning, and recognizing one's own voices as whole persons, privileges, experiences and limitations, against the banking system of education, to create learning environments where education can evolve and transform those who learn and those who teach.

hooks (1994) uses the ideals of Paulo Freire to critically explore theory as a liberatory practice for feminist women of color, challenges the intersectional space i.e. feminist women of color, from both within and outside the group e.g. theory produced by women of color not assessed as 'theoretical enough' in light of the fact that most theory is produced by white men. Even feminist studies were punctuated with voices of white women with very little representation, in fact, outright dismissal, of women of color. She describes her experiences of creating a feminist classroom and explores the ambiguous relationship between black women scholars and feminist thoughts. She also proposes a way forward:

"If revitalized feminist movement is to have a transformative impact on women, then creating a context where we can engage in open critical dialogue with one another, where we can debate and discuss without fear of emotional collapse, where we can hear and know one another in the difference and complexities of our experience, is essential. Collective feminist movement cannot go forward if this step is never taken. When we create this woman space where we can value difference and complexity,  sisterhood based on political solidarity will emerge." (p.  110)

Interestingly, the knowledge that the fourteen-year-old student in the madrasah school is producing through her artwork, seen as sinful and hence transgressive within the contextual influences of the religion taught in her boarding school, is not just transgressive within her religion or her schooling system. The transgression extends to the

global context as well, where feminist theory and knowledge is the domain of the white woman, and other social sciences have traditionally been dominated by white men, her speaking for herself through her artwork is a globally transgressive act. Through her artwork, she speaks for herself, even if it may be a damaged self.

It is important, however, to be wary of engaging in what Tuck (2009) describes as damage-centered research, where we intent on portraying our neighborhoods and tribes as defeated and broken.

"In damaged-centered research, one of the major activities is to document pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe. Though connected to deficit mod els—frameworks that emphasize what a particular student, family, or community is lacking to explain underachievement or failure—damage-centered research is distinct in being more socially and historically situated. It looks to historical ex ploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy. Common sense tells us this is a good thing, but the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a patholo gizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community. Here's a more applied definition of damage-centered research: research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change the establishes harm or injury in or der to achieve reparation." (Tuck, 2009).

I have no way but to acknowledge that in a situation where no data has been produced on a community rendered invisible, damage-centric or otherwise, it is difficult

not to begin by engaging with the brokenness of the community as they see it, as a starting point for research. The brokenness, as Tuck describes, a result of decades of oppression in colonial and postcolonial settings, by those who deemed bodies of the second sex as grounds to lay siege on as a result of factual historical exploitation, domination and colonization.

In order to shift focus to a more desire centered approach as an attempt at justice through presenting whole selves, I would however, draw attention to the fact that while her artwork is reflective of sorrow and helplessness, it is also reflective of ambition 'to fly'. She defines her dream to fly as her reality. Desire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives. Given that she belongs to a community where expression through both artwork and ambition on the part of females are both repressed, the artist's ability to dream and communicate through artwork is liberatory and qualifies in fitting into the desire-based format. Moving forward, I will engage in analysis of artwork that is a more apt and desirable representation of the community through a desire-centric approach.

*Of Hope*

With the next piece of data, also a piece of artwork displayed at 'Slant- Tilted Perspectives', I aim to move into more of a desire-centric approach as an alternative, where the hopes of community are captured in conjunction with the pains.
This piece of artwork was produced by a 15-year-old student of the same madrasah. Using orange and red to paint a bright sun emerging against a blue sky reflected on a

bright blue still lake, the main sentiment reflected in the artwork is that of hope reiterated in the following artist statement.

"Just as the nature has seven forms I have such forms too. The nature changes and I change too so I see myself as the nature."

Engaging in artwork through a reflexive exercise allows the artist to display a social constructionist perspective whereby she speaks about being constructed by her experiences. She also believes in not being defined by single experiences. Her construction is a continuous, and an evolving process, resulting in her evolution. She does not consider herself fixed, but rather, like nature, her personality is made up of many colors which change with seasons. The number seven is not a literal representation, but rather a colloquial expression in Bangla that represents diversity.

The reason I chose this piece of artwork is two-fold: first is the contrast against the previous artwork with which it was produced. It is interesting for me that two students of the same institution produced artwork as self-reflection that is so different in the sentiments they evoke. While the previous artwork was resonant of struggle, this one was more resonant of triumph. The second reason is a personal connection I feel to the way she sees herself. On an interview for The Ajala Project, when asked about what makes me unique, I have responded with the following:

"My uniqueness lies in my fluidity, I feel. I treat myself like a body of water that can either be a steady stream or a raging ocean depending on where I am and what is needed from me. You'll most likely be unable to contain me in a glass, though. I cannot stay still for very long." (Hossain, 2013)

Therefore, in my own ongoing reflexive exercise, I find that a value, or a part of my identity I hold dear, is fluidity or the ability to change.

Applying the framework of the Multiple Dimensions of Identity model, it can be inferred that much like the previous artist, her artwork cannot be considered as conclusive data about which particular contextual influences she is taking into account or how she is making meaning of her contextual influences. In the West, there have been case studies about diversity among students in higher education which have challenged readers to consider multiple approaches as they reflect on how they would respond to complex situations. Weigand and LePeau (2012) encouraged case study respondents addressing issues of diversity and inclusion to also foreground their own identity as they formulated their response. Faculty and administrators of colleges and universities in North America, who are working together to shape and influence campus climate have been obliged to take into account that they are simultaneously shaped by that environment, their previous environments, and the multiple forms of their own identity, both oppressed and privileged, that are salient to themselves and to those with whom they interact. In the context of establishing effective partnerships, taking the time to carefully reflect on one's own identity and intersections contributes to authentic interactions and an appreciation for the complexities of intersectionality (Dooley and LePeau, 2016). Therefore, the reflexive exercise she has undergone while producing this artwork, where she has reflected on her ability to embody diversity, to change and embrace her multiple dimensions, serves as the purpose of established authentic interactions and appreciation of complexities of intersectionality.

However, there is clear indication that she is aware of being a result of her contextual influences, which causes her to change as they change. For the young women who were part of Jones and McEwen's study, both difference and privilege worked to mediate the connection with and salience of various identity dimensions (i.e., race was not salient for White women; religion was very salient for Jewish women; culture was salient for the Asian Indian woman). For the artist here, it is not clear which identity dimensions are most salient. However, she seems to be clear that being produced as a woman, within her contextual influences allows her to embody a sense of fluidity and diversity her peer does not display. This is surprising information and quite contradictory to the evidence previously produced by a student at the same institution.

According to Deaux (1993): social identities are those roles [e.g., parent] or membership categories [e.g., Latino or Latina] that a person claims as representative. Personal identity refers to those traits and behaviors [e.g., kind or responsible] that the person finds self-descriptive, characteristics that are typically linked to one or more of the identity categories (p. 6). Thus, the core identity in this conceptual model might be described as "personal identity" in Deaux's language, and the multiple identities (intersecting circles) characterize Deaux's "social identities." This particular piece of art is interesting because, while it gives no indication of physical attributes, it is indicative of two values that may be part of the artist's core identity i.e. adaptability and diversity.  In that sense, this piece of artwork may be the most authentic expression of her core identity, independent of her social identities.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler (1997) moves beyond Hegel in the development of her thesis. In order to shed light on how a psyche emerges that is an agent of

power as well as a victim and how power is appropriated such that it works against the power that constituted it, Butler draws on her own insights in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) about reiteration and repetition central to her idea that gender is performative. She argues that gender is an effect of body performance, which gives the illusion of an inner core, rather than being an expression of an inner core. As mentioned before, the artwork is not sufficient data to understand whether or not their gender identities are part of their core. However, within the broader context of Bangladesh, understanding of gender is seldom nuanced enough to accommodate that gender is performative. Therefore, within her institution, as well as elsewhere in Bangladesh, it can be assumed that gender is an expression of inner core.

While the performance of gender, understood as an expression of an inner core, entails a repetition of acts (the imitation of the acts of others and those of oneself over time), the identity produced is not unified or the same as that of others. A difference in repetition is apparent, Butler says in her book *Gender Trouble* through a "perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization" (p.138). This fluidity that Butler alludes to is demonstrative in the artwork 'Seven forms of Nature'. Her process of becoming is also a continuous process resulting in a fluidity of her Self. While her peer, whose artwork depicts a caged bird, sees herself as 'trapped', diversity, nature and fluidity are apparent features of her artwork, suggesting openness to resignification and recontextualization. This piece of artwork, in comparison to the previous piece of artwork, is brighter, hopeful and much stronger evidence of how adolescents in Bangladeshi madrasahs can take up as their own the terms of their subjection.

Butler applies the idea of identity being disrupted through its reiteration to her analysis of power. She moves on to state that just as identity undergoes a change in signification through a change in context, so does the power that constitutes identity. Understood in terms of the unstable structure, of reiteration, the power that constitutes the subject is transformed when "taken up and reiterated in the subject's 'own' acting" (Butler, 1997: 12-14). While the previous the subject's 'own' acting was acting as an adolescent woman of faith in a conservative Islamic institution, it led her to feel 'trapped' or 'caged', and the 'Seven forms of Nature' is indicative of the power that the subject feels vested in her that constitutes her identity.

Particularly important to the discussion of multiple identities, Deaux (1993) indicated that, within the tradition of sociology, "multiple identities are assumed" (p. 5). Therefore, in the case of both artists then, it is safe to conclude that within the realm of the social sciences, multiple identities would have to be assumed. In her research, Deaux underscores the importance of the context in which social identities exist, distinctions between self-perceived inside self and outside identity, and the ongoing negotiations and relationships between one's personal and social identities that. It is interesting that the two artists had had their social identities produced in similar contexts, but have taken up the terms of their subjection in very unique ways. For me, both pieces of artwork have resonated at a personal level, in speaking of my experiences of struggle with reconciliation of my identities is the first one, and the triumph of accepting and embracing my fluidity in the second one.

However, there is not enough information to assume from the piece of artwork, what other social identities may constitute multiple identities for either of the adoles-

cents who produced the artwork. In such a case, supplementary data from the organization's Facebook page may be relied upon in providing information about the subject.

*#FreeIAm:*

The final part of my analysis is derived from the experiences of the girls captured during a discussion that took place beyond the scope of this research, for the purpose of designing a social media campaign to break stereotypes about madrasah students.

The #FreeIAm campaign, aiming to uncover the hopes, dreams, and lived experiences of the girls in the same institution (cite), an interesting phenomena was revealed. The campaign brought together three girls on the basis of unconventional career aspirations, or those career aspirations which are seen as conflicting with Islamic values, and paired with successful career women who were apt at mitigating the multiple dimensions of their identity. Bits of the conversation between the girls and the mentors were recorded and published on the Leaping Boundaries Facebook page. In a video published on the Facebook page of Leaping Boundaries as part of a social media a campaign with the hashtag #freeiam, three female students from the same madrasah responded to the question of whether they like to celebrate Pohela Boishakh i.e. the Bengali New Year. This is important in the context of the Muslim-Bengali dichotomy that has been omnipresent in post 1971 Bangladesh.

In 2017 and 2018 Islamic political parties in Bangladesh opposed the celebration of *pohela boishakh*. Religion-based party Jamaat-e-Islami have observed that *Mongol Shobhajatra*, which is a mass procession that takes place at dawn on the first day of the

Bengali New Year in Bangladesh, is a part of the Hindu culture and labelled the iconic event of the *pohela boishakh* celebrations as *haram* or forbidden in Islam. Nayeb-e-Ameer of the Jamaat-I-Islami party, Mujibor Rahman was quoted in a national daily urging the authorities concerned to take "emergency measures" to stop observance of the procession (Tribune Desk, April 13, 2017). He asserted that Islam "never approves this procession" as the participants wear masks of dolls, elephants, dragons, horses and other animals, and parade the streets dancing with their partners.

In 2018, leaders of the Islamic group Hefazat-e-Islam issued a similar statement that the Mongol Shobhajatra procession observed on the morning of *pohela boishakh* is '*haram*'.  Hefazat Secretary General Junaid Babunagari issued a statement saying: "In the name of celebrating the Bangla New Year, observing a procession with animal replicas is against the faith and practices of Muslims. "Adult men and women wearing indecent clothing and paint on their face and dancing together to the rhythm of drums while carrying giant dolls and animal masks – this Hindu ritual is being forced upon Muslims by the state. This is absolutely forbidden in the eyes of Islam," he said in the statement.

In a context, where statements such as the ones above are regularly issued, it is only natural for one who deems their religious social identity as the most salient one, to wonder if the concept of a Bengali-linguistic-cultural heritage, at the base of the formation of the state, is one that they fit into. It would have also been natural for those who identify primarily as Muslims in Bangladesh to deny their Bengali cultural heritage.

However, when the girls were asked about how they celebrated *pohela boishakh*, they responded with surprising answers about cooking fish, dressing up in saris inside the madrasah, receiving gifts from family members. Contrary to the popular belief, these

girls were engaging in what was considered by conservatives as a 'Hindu' tradition, in conflict with their Muslim identities. From the perspective of 'Multiple Dimensions of Identity', therefore, the girls were embracing their Bengali identities alongside their Muslim identities. Their *burkha* clad bodies were embodiments of their Muslim identities, their institutions proponents of Islam, and yet, despite the narrative perpetuated by political and religious groups in Bangladesh that seeks to isolate Bengali culture, the girls were integrating parts into their own social identities.

Even though, these girls were not the same girls who produced the artwork, they were all students of the same institution. There is no information to indicate whether these girls participated in the exhibition, and if they did, what the result of their reflexive artistic portrayals looked like. The data that has been used to uncover their storied experiences, through artwork and conversations documented on social media has been pieced together with my own understanding and personal narrative derived from field experiences, to paint a coherent picture of their lived experiences and how they conceptualize their own identities as Muslim, Bengali Women in Bangladesh.

# CHAPTER 5

## Differences, the Social Production of the 'Other' and Subjectivity

"These are the stories of First Alaska and Native America and of many communities across the United States and the globe. They are the finger-shaped bruises on our pulse points." (Tuck, 2009, p. 412)

There is as much danger in representing the Other's experiences as in not representing it at all. The Other, i.e. the Indian, the Native, the Black, the Oriental, has been produced and reproduced countless times in history, but rarely ever self-produced. Traditionally, in the reading and understanding of the other, the representation has been damage centric i.e. focused on telling stories of the damage rather than desire (Tuck, 2009, p. 413), and differences have been ignored. This applies whether it is the woman who is being presented in otherness to a man or the Oriental who is being presented in otherness to European or the neo-colonial American whiteness. Both Bannerji (1995) and Said (2004) begin with a critique of universalism. While Said (2004) discusses the politics of universal representation by the English of the Oriental, hijacking the lived experience of the Oriental and never allowing the Oriental to speak for themselves, Bannerji (1995) speaks of her coming to terms with the failure of her own colonial education in securing a universalized, global identity for herself.

In his book *The Scope for Orientalism*, Said (2004) presents public speeches and writings of two British imperialists of the early 20th century about the Egyptian context,

making an emphasis on how they stress that the British imperial authorities "know bet-ter" than them, their own Oriental country. He points to how the Orient was created as a political vision:

> The most important thing about the theory during the first decade of the twenti-eth century was that it worked, and worked staggeringly well. The argument, when reduced to its simplest form, was dear, it was precise, it was easy to grasp. There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power (36).

This cultural and academic project of Orientalizing the Orient was institutionalized in learned societies, academic journals, and conceptual views. The link between these learned societies and the Orientalism as the phenomenon for which they all worked was two-fold: they drew on Orientalism and they gradually transformed it. This transforma-tion was more an intensification and improvement rather than a transformation of libera-tion, proven, according to Said, by more contemporary 1970s speeches of American politicians who reproduce in their writing the same Oriental myth of the nineteenth cen-tury. This reproduction can be seen to be still thriving, in more contemporary rhetoric, for instance in Donald Trump's production of the Orient in his electoral speeches. Thus, Orientalness, can be said to be produced in the same way as white-produced blackness (Fanon, 2008) by colonialism in order to justify and secure its position as the colonizer/ neo-colonizer.

In her chapter, "But who speaks for us?" Himani Bannerji (1995) sheds light on the politics of difference as they affect women of color in the postcolonial world, raising questions that go beyond the analysis of Marx or Fanon. However, much like Fanon's experiential reality of constructed (racialized) subjectivities, Bannerji dedicates the first part of her chapter to explain the creation, maintenance, and eventual solidification of white-produced 'otherness'. Even in knowledge that is deemed as active knowledge, such as feminist theory, this otherness is inescapable. The narration that draws on her personal and political anguish is precise and powerful in refuting the myth of universal sisterhood. Bannerji refutes the feminist theory that arises as an otherness to man, a feminist theory posits the synthetic category of 'woman' as unified consciousness and a universal subject. This unified consciousness is created in otherness to 'man' (Bannerji, p. 68) similarly to how the oriental is created in otherness to the white man. She goes on to critique western feminism as incomplete knowledge, that disregards the experiences of women of color:

> "The authentic ground of a woman's subjectivity seems to rest on her other, unitary woman-self and otherness to man (two single singular subjects with ontologically antithetical consciousnesses) assuming a global sameness for all women trans-historically, socially as well as trans-personally" (p.68).

While it is important to understand, engage in and encourage a global solidarity amongst women, to discard differences among white women and women of color or to consider women of color as one monolithic entity is naive and problematic. She further states:

"Our "difference" then is not simply a matter of "diversities" which are being sup -pressed arbitrarily, but a way of noting and muting at the same time fundamental and social contradictions and antagonisms." (p.72)

It is in speaking of and acknowledging differences therefore, that intersectionality becomes important, as do storied experiences. Intersectionality, identifies the diverse ways race and gender overlap to shape multiple dimensions of experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). The importance of intersectionality stems from the fact that it takes into account both race and gender as integral in shaping one's experiences or, in other words, experiences of women of color, as Crenshaw (p. 1243) states, "are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism".

Traditionally, production of scientific knowledge has relied on the criteria of generalizability in determining the value of research. However, Bannerji (1995) points to the role of personal experiences in capturing knowledge. Feminist theory serves as an 'active knowledge' that accommodates for the personal as encoded in its slogan "the personal is political" (p. 65). However, for it to function fully, it needs to incorporate a more subjective, personal knowledge that is representative of the other, particularly women of color. Bannerji uses feminist theory as a starting point to emphasize that "integrative reflexive analysis to work out a political position which allows anyone to speak for/from the experience of individuals while leaving room to speak socially from other locations, along the lines of relations that inform our own experiences" (p.84) is necessary. She proposes a social analysis that begins with "subjectivity, which asserts dynamic, contradictory and unresolved dimensions of experience, and consequently, does not reify itself

into a fixed psychological category called identity. This rigidifies an individual's social experience with her environment and history." (p. 88)

What Bannerji insinuates about the universal sisterhood that is created in other-ness to man, is applicable to the kind of sisterhood and solidarity that I have aimed to create through my act of inquiry. My research through and with the girls I have worked with is undertaken as an act of solidarity that I feel due to sharing the same religious and ethnic backgrounds that I have returned to over and over again. On some level, I suppose, we also share parts of the same lived experiences as a result of being sub-jected to repression by some of the same ideological state apparatus. However, if I fail to acknowledge our points of differences, I risk falling into the same traps of feminist theory that Bannerji has taken a stand against.

Our points of difference arise from the fact that I have been allotted many privi-leges owing to my socio-economic class. My privileged socio-economic class has al-lowed me to explore and engage in cultures that are foreign to me, giving me an out-sider's lens to look into insider experiences. My 'privileged' socio-economic class has allowed me access to a language that I use today to communicate with a global audi-ence. My privilege has also rendered me a neocolonialist, a colonized brown woman with colonialism imprinted all over her. My lens, therefore, is not so different than the white feminist lens that attempts to create a sense of solidarity and universal sisterhood in otherness to man. I echo sentiments that Bannerji (1995) evokes through her critique of western feminism in the following quote:

> "Decontexting "patriarchy" or gender from social organization — which is
>
> structured by both cooperative and antagonistic social relations — ob

scures the real ways in which power works. Using this framework, we

cannot conceptualize a reality where women are complicit and "gender" is

implicated in both creating and maintaining class and racist domination.

Neither can we see the cooperative engendering of the social space of

classes, or the simultaneity of this cooperation with the necessary subor

dination of women within the dominant or subordinate classes." (p.69)

Unlike the white man, whose privilege is absolute, my privilege is a continually shifting phenomenon, contingent upon time and space. Nevertheless, just as feminist theory is not adequate in capturing women's experiences in relation to class and race in the West, the premises upon which I have based my analysis may be flawed or at the very least, incomplete as a result of "valorizing women as woman" and denying actual lived experiences. Here, I retract my position as a knower-subject. And it is with this humility that I proceed with my discoveries from the research.

**An ambivalent quest: A comprehensive scholarly discussion of all the findings**

I started this research in the same hope with which I started my work with madrasahs -  it was with an obscure hope of resolving this clash of identities within my-self. The resolution is still an ambivalent quest.

I have used three pieces of data to analyze how female students of aliya madrasahs represent Muslim women in Bangladesh. I used a poem I wrote based on some of their experiences as an entry point into their storied experiences i.e. the art-work from an exhibition titled 'Slant: Tilted Perspectives'. The storied experiences were

then further supported with some secondary literature from a social media campaign to showcase the hopes and dreams of the girls from this institution by accepting their whole selves. The theoretical framework used social constructionism followed by multiple dimensions of identity theory and finally Judith Butler's theory of subjection as the basis for the analysis interspersed with Himani Bannerji's theories of social production. My objective was to use storied experiences as a way of uncovering lived realities of adolescent girls in Bangladeshi madrasahs, using my own lens as a woman who has perceived shared experiences as a result of being produced as Muslim women in Bangladeshi society.

Being produced as young women in Bangladeshi society has several identity implications. While on the surface, a Muslim majority nation with a single ethnolinguistic background may not seem like one which is very diverse, each individual embodies diversity and engages in complex negotiations of identities that may be incomprehensible to outsiders. Multiple identities that constitute national, gender, religious, ethnic, linguistic identities compete to occupy space within highly politicized bodies, whose very existence is a statement forcing each one of us to engage in complex negotiations. Our victory is the act of taking up as our own the terms of our subjection in the societies where we are constantly being produced and reproduced. There is no simple answer to how adolescent girls are negotiating multiple dimensions of their identities or taking up the terms of their subjection. The evidence reveals that this is a complicated project, one which varies in great degree and is contingent upon time, space and individual.

I started my inquiry by laying out the historical background of madrasahs and their complex relationship with the state. In lieu of the complicated historical back-

ground, I had presumed that there would be noticeable tensions among the multiple so-cial identities that make up the girls who are being produced and socially constructed by their schools i.e. madrasahs, families, religious institutions and ideologies, and nations. I wanted to explore, therefore, through my own experiences as well as theirs, how these tensions were negotiated and how the subjects were taking up the terms of their subjec-tion and empowering themselves. However, in order to understand how young women's negotiations with their gender and religion speak to empowerment, it is important that we distance ourselves from binaries and focus instead on all the ways in which the self is applied, the ends different kinds of conflict aim for and the relationship between dif-ferent aims which the self desires.

In her paper, "Negotiating Islam: Conservatism, Splintered Authority and Empow-erment in Urban Bangladesh," Huq (2010) investigated three groups of women. The first group are factory workers, who have little formal education and whose significant pres-ence in the labor force has led to changes in the economy as well as marked a change towards greater mobility and entitlements for themselves. The second are university students who by virtue of their education are expected to leave a significant mark on the socioeconomic and political landscape of Bangladesh. The third group are women who participate in *taleem* and argued:

> "in the midst of a very polarised milieu where one is considered to be staunchly secular and thereby espousing all or most liberal ideals in how one leads one's life, or succumbing to religious rhetoric, most people are in fact in between, nego tiating between the two camps, and borrowing ideas and ways from both. In this negotiation, there are those, such as factory workers and students who stress

outcomes that are posited and viewed as results of a liberal vision and pursuit of life. However, we see that for this group religion is not completely negated. If any thing, we find that when religious rhetoric that stresses the importance of family feels burdensome, it is culture/society rather than religion that is made to shoul der the responsibility of that burden. In other words, there is a tendency to sal vage religion from the disrepute of injustice and subordination, and thereby offer it a sanctified place in women's lives. While in women's everyday lives the reli gious may be circumscribed within the liberal, we have also seen, as exemplified through the purdah example, that everyday navigations include women making religious rhetoric speak more profoundly to the interiorities of the self." (p.103)

Her conclusion suggests that rather than a polarization of the secular and religious ways of living, most people she studied are negotiating between the two camps, and borrow- ing ideas and ways from both. While the subjects of my study would not identify them- selves as secular, the part religiosity plays on their identities as a core expression of their psyche is obscure. However, hard and fast conclusions about how Muslimness plays into their identity and whether it is a source of empowerment or disempowerment, are difficult to draw.

It is also difficult to assume from the data if they are necessarily using their mas- tery of religion as a tool to take up the terms of their own subjection. The data suggests that their mastery is not limited to religion. The girls exhibit interests in art, poetry, and alo in acts of indulgences through buying and wearing new clothes on *pohela baishakh.* These are all ways of negotiating multiple dimensions of their identities as well as taking

up the terms of their own subjection. The presence and strength of religion as an identity dimension, other than implied, remains unexplored.

What is clear in their conceptualization of identity is that being a woman i.e. their gender identity, is one that they are most aware of. They are also aware that as a result of being produced as a woman very much renders them the 'second sex'. They have the burden of responsibility when they are subject to acts of sexual harassment and they feel trapped as women in conservative societies. That may very well be a production of the deeply patriarchal society in Bangladesh and not solely religiously based discourses. However, they take up the terms of their subjection in very unique ways, sometimes using the same tools to gain mastery over themselves. Their conceptualization of self widely varies.

The fact that religious expressions are considered to have the same political underpinnings in Bangladesh as it does in the West, it is a much feared truth in the country. The constant struggle between secular and religious has unfolded in local politics in ways that is in-conducive for either political party in Bangladesh. In such a scenario, female bodies that are part of religious schools are highly political bodies, simply by virtue of being part of a religious education system and as well as by their engagement in religious expressions, for example the veil.

I have also become aware of my own biases through the process of this investigation.  As researchers, we need to question our own academic assumptions about the links between religion, gender and empowerment in education. My own production as a colonized female educated in Western liberal arts has enabled me to engage in a liberal discourse, which allows me to critically examine processes of becoming, but has unde-

niably hegemonised my mind and my intellectual endeavours. As a result, I may have entered into the research with a mindset that religion is threatening because it may compete with liberalism and secularism as ideals and is often a tool for disempowerment of young women. I also assumed that the girls were using a mastery of religion to take up the terms of their subjection. This has shifted over the course of the research leading to the conclusion, that even if the girls feel subjugated as a result of their contextual influences, it is more the contextual influence of the socially constructed definition of gender rather than the socially constructed definition of piety. In addition, while I assumed religion to be an important part of their identities and how they take up the terms of their subjection, they used mastery of art rather than religion itself as tools.

Popular notions and academic discussions alike tend to portray Islam in the political space and Islam in everyday lives and people's homes with the same brush. This prevents Islam in the private realms from gaining legitimacy as a valid way of being and offering people 'real' routes to empowerment, although it is very likely. For the subjects of my research, while cultural and political discourses splinter their identities across the religious-secular dichotomy, in their private realms, maybe surprisingly, their identities are not so splintered. Of course, there is some friction of course between what is institutionally imposed and what their core values and desires produce. Nevertheless, these girls are frequently engaging in and negotiating multiple dimensions of their identities and taking up terms of their subjection in various ways. Islam in the political space, from what the data indicates, has little bearing on their understanding of selves.

There is a need to further examine the links between politics and everyday experiences before claiming empowerment derived from religion as inherent acts of empow-

erment or placing them on the back burner simply as a result of being derived from reli-gion. Therefore, there is a need to rethink our own positions, assumptions and our own comfort or discomfort with religious comportment in order to understand in the spirit of intellectual and academic objectivity where, why and how religious ideas and forms may be deemed empowering or disempowering. As Huq (2010) suggests:

> "Such an academic and self reflective exercise will enable us to not only under stand the overtly religious, but also those who are more on a liberal-secular tra jectory than a religious one, but who feel that religion offers additional ways through which rights, freedom and empowerment are to be achieved." (p. 104).

The inconclusiveness or ambivalences in our understanding of the young girl who stud-ies in a madrasah and dons a veil may be unsettling, especially to those who are com-fortably couched in either the religious or secular camp. But it is precisely what is nec-essary to create more spaces that accommodate for the in-between, those who do not fit into either camps fully but are trying to make sense of themselves in tumultuous times, when the tides of change give rise to many doubts, and "people who are caught in them are trying to make sense of the different waves differently at different times" (Huq 2010). Therefore, I conclude my thesis with a plea to engage in a deeper understanding of this ambivalence so that we, as academics and researchers, may gain greater insight into how such engagement speaks to empowerment.

# APPENDICES

Appendix A



Appendix B

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