

THE “FILMY” LIFE OF A BENGALI WESTERN BOY

1. INTRODUCTION

Canada is considered one of the “Golden Nations” to various developing countries in the modern world. Bengalis have been migrating to this country since way before I was even born. The core idea beneath every family’s migration is the desire to provide better educational and economic opportunities for the members of that family. Immigrants come from all over the world, including nations struggling during political crises. In the end, everyone comes with the hope of having a better life in Canada. My family also migrated to this country with that hope. However, one cannot determine the future or how this decision may reshape the identity of each member of the family. This essay is a reflection on my journey as a Bengali boy navigating through the Western world and adapting to a different culture. The process itself shaped my identity as I adjusted to life within the Western culture of the Canadian Bengali Diaspora. I use the word “filmy” in the title of the paper to refer to the ways in which I draw connections between my life (and the lives of other Bengali youths) and classic Bollywood television shows and movies. I believe the struggles, suffering, and success of Bengali immigrant families is not too different from what is shown in these Bollywood films. I will be discussing this journey through four major sections. The first will shed some light on my upbringing and the life I left behind in Bangladesh. The second section will describe the migration of my family to British Columbia, Canada, and the struggles that came with the hope of a better life. The third section will discuss the role I had to play and the responsibilities I took on as the eldest son of the family. Finally, in the last section, the importance of maintaining the social image of the youths in British Columbia’s Bengali community will be discussed.

2. MY UPBRINGING

For the context of this paper, it is crucial to describe the life I had left behind in Bangladesh prior to migrating with my family to Canada. I was born in December, 1990 in the capital city, Dhaka. Aside from my parents, my maternal grandparents – my “*nana*” and “*nanuma*” – played a huge role in raising me. My mother conceived me at a very young age; however, she successfully completed her education, raised her two children, and went on to become a professor of Library and Information Science at Rajshahi University. Due to her work, she had to move to a different city, and since my sister was finishing Kindergarten, it only made sense for her to move with my mother. My father, on the other hand, was in the import/export business and had to travel a lot to countries like Dubai, Saudi Arabia, and

China. It was best for me to be raised by my grandparents since they lived so close to my birth home. I never felt a lack of guidance or parenthood, and I owe a lot to my grandparents for raising me to be the man I am today. However, from a very young age, I spent most of my free time watching Bollywood and Hollywood movies to keep myself entertained, which is exactly why, as I grew older, I was able to connect my life with movies a lot more.

The last school I attended before migrating to Canada was an “English Medium” boarding school. Going to an “English Medium” school was the norm in Bangladesh for middle to upper class families; every parent desired that their children would grow up and go abroad in the future to further their education. Hence, it was crucial for me to learn proper English and educate myself with a reflection of Western culture while living in Bangladesh.

As this was the beginning of my teenage years, life seemed “cool.” Maintaining grades was an easy yet tedious aspect of life, but having friends and doing various activities was more amusing. As a fan of movies such as *Vaastav*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, and *Kaho Na Pyaar Hain*, I adopted certain traits that I learned from watching the heroes of these movies. There are various things I did with my friends that I am not proud of, but at that point in time even the wrong things felt so right; it seemed to me that I was living my life to the fullest. However, my parents decided to move me out of boarding school, and told me quite suddenly that we were migrating to Canada. The situation had all the potential to be a travesty for me, yet somehow, I was looking forward to a new and challenging adventure.

3. THE MIGRATION

It was May 9, 2004 when we boarded our flight from Dhaka, Bangladesh on route to Vancouver, Canada. The unknown adventure lying ahead manifested feelings of excitement within me. Coming from Dhaka, Vancouver seemed much more tranquil. I did not hear the constant honking of cars or people chattering all around me. The fresh air of Vancouver gave me the feeling of a Bollywood movie scene – when the hero goes to a beautiful new country to pursue his dreams. My parents’ dream was to work towards a better future for their son and daughter. The political uncertainty and constant violence in Bangladesh caused them to believe that migrating to Canada would provide an ideal and secure life. This dream mainly applied to my sister and me, and in order to fulfill this dream my parents confronted the inevitable obstacles that many new immigrants must encounter.

As I mentioned earlier, we lived a happy upper-middle class lifestyle in Dhaka. In Vancouver, our first apartment was a one-bedroom unit for the four of us. Finding a job was the one of the most challenging experiences for my parents. It was clear to me from an early age that employers in Canada do not always consider past accomplishments of immigrants, if they are from a different country. My father struggled to explore potential business opportunities in Vancouver, regardless of his years of experience as a businessman. My mother, on the other hand, would have to go back to school for another degree if she wanted to stay in her field. In the meantime, savings were running thin, hence both of my parents decided to apply to work at a nearby Petro-Canada gas station. I realize now how difficult this was for them, as status and class are core aspects of a Bengali family’s identity. As the autumn of 2004 neared, I had to take a test with the Vancouver

School Board to determine the level of my mathematics and English. Based on my score, I was admitted directly into Grade 9, even though I had only completed a quarter of Grade 8 in Bangladesh. However, it was mandatory for me to take an ESL course for a semester. Through this course, I was introduced to a group of international students. Due to my high school being very multicultural, racism and discrimination were issues I did not have to face at a young age. I thrived on studying different cultures and meeting people from different backgrounds and learning their traditions.

Based on my experiences, I found that happiness is a by-product of money. It has been an ongoing debate for countless years whether money does or does not buy happiness. As much as I wish for the old saying to be true, my personal experience speaks otherwise. I believe every immigrant family requires some level of capital to avoid conflict within the family, especially those who come from a middle class standing in their birth country. Based on discussions I have had with friends from immigrant families, most of us are aware of our parents' motivation for deciding to move to North America. As we hit our adolescence, we start to acknowledge the sacrifices our parents make and the motivations behind the sacrifices to succeed in this society. This idea becomes an integral part of shaping our identity. Therefore, from an early age, the idea of finances and savings was entrenched in my brain. My father would always bring me toys from his business trips when we were residing in Bangladesh; in Canada, it was much different. My parents did their best to make sure that we never felt less than other kids around us. Somehow, we adapted to the concept of asking for less. They worked hard in the early years, doing various odd jobs such as working at gas stations, grocery stores, or Subway in order to buy us clothes from our desired brands. My mother would never shop for herself. I noticed this, and it made me become very focused on my education and career goals for the future.

Even when I started to understand the importance of finances and asked for less, it did not necessarily stop the battle of living in Canada as immigrants. I do believe I would not have understood the importance of money and how one should learn to spend it if I were still in Bangladesh. Being an immigrant made me notice and appreciate the little things in life. I mentioned how throughout my life I have been able to draw connections between my life and the movies and the characters within them. In the midst of financial struggle, I used Bollywood movies and shows as a source of positive inspiration. The future is always unpredictable; however, if we observe similarities between our lives and the lives of characters from a show, we not only connect to those characters on a personal level, but we also find inspiration from the paths those characters choose. This inspiration eventually guided me from my present to my future in a positive way.

4. THE ROLE OF THE ELDEST SON

Anyone who is familiar with Bollywood movies or any South Asian drama knows that the eldest son must deal with responsibilities that are determined by society and their families. As a teenager, instead of focusing on bettering myself, I first had to think about being the eldest son and a big brother for my sister. Even though my sister is only two and a half years younger than me, my parents engraved in my mind the idea that whatever I do, my sister will follow in my footsteps. My actions will impact the social image of my family. Until I was 21 years of age, I did not go out on dates with anyone, have any romantic

relationships, or attend any “parties” late at night, since I would always find myself thinking it was my duty to not give my sister a chance to use my “bad” behavior as an excuse for her own. I felt I had to maintain the role of the obedient son/brother of the family. So much of my life revolved around family and culture, which created a rift between me and Western society, where people seemed to live for themselves. For a man that is so involved with culture and family, completely adjusting to the Western independent lifestyle was challenging.

My identity has been significantly shaped by my family. However, it has always been difficult to balance my Western life and my Bengali life due to the two drastically contrasting beliefs of my parents. My father views the world like it is still the 1970s, and a son can never look his father in the eye and tell him he is wrong. During my early teenage years, I would always get involved whenever my parents had arguments, and it did more harm than good. In the end, my father would think his son had become a “*beyadob chele*,” which basically means a “disrespectful boy.” If I saw that my mother was not being treated fairly, I would raise my voice against my father. Over the years, I have controlled my passion and anger and realized that no matter how hard I fought or how high I raised my voice, it was not the ideal solution.

The title of this paper refers to my “filmy life” and how I view my relationship with my father. Growing up, some of the movies I watched portrayed the father/son relationship as extremely friendly, and the rest would focus only on the respect and obedience aspects of their relationship. In the movie *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, the eldest son must make really hard decisions just to please his father, but there is a point in the movie when he has to put himself first before his family, which ends up causing a rift between father and son. When it came to my own life, I started focusing on finding the middle ground to avoid a possible rift just like in the movie. However, since my father is more traditional minded, no matter how hard I tried he considered himself as the “man of the house”/provider, and believed that I as his son would have to agree with his decisions. My mother’s liberal ideologies allowed for open communication between her and me. By contrast, even after turning 27 years of age, I have not had the opportunity to talk to my father about adulthood, issues I may face in life, or even “girl problems.” Most conversations I have had with him are based around the concept of money and business. I know I will need to start providing for my family so that he can retire and focus on his business ventures. My mom, on the other hand, suggests that I build my own assets based on the money I earn so that my future is secured. She does not allow me to worry about taking care of my parents once they are old. Even though I will look after them one way or another, my father’s traditional mentality differs from my own mentality, and a lot of the difference is due to our migration to Canada. In Bangladesh, often the son inherits the father’s business; however, in Western culture everyone needs to learn to stand on their own two feet. As the only son and as an older brother I must still carry myself in such a way that my family can depend on me for both financial and emotional security when needed. At the age of 27, I am still learning and working hard towards keeping a balance. Movies will always depict a fictional story, however when there is a sense of realism in the decision-making process of the characters, I am inspired by it and apply it to my own life.

5. NAVIGATING THROUGH BENGALI SOCIETY IN A WESTERN WORLD

One of the most difficult aspects of living in Canada as a Bengali youth is maintaining a good image of ourselves within Bengali society. There are already a set of rules that Bengali youths should abide by. However, it becomes especially tough when how I live Western life can be determined by my Bengali culture and society. Having to maintain my image in accordance with Bengali cultural expectations has created complications and an imbalance in my Western life.

The ingredients of a proper Bengali are generated from both culture and religion. Cultural and religious traits of a youth are analyzed to determine whether they are a “proper” youth or not. For example, whenever guests would be over at our house, it was mandatory for my sister and me to not only greet the guests, but also spend some time with them. Exam preparation days were exceptions. There were days when I simply would not be in a proper mood to be in front of people, but I still had to go through the meet and greet process of giving my “*Salaam*” to every guest. This kept my parents happy, and preserved my image of being such an obedient boy towards the “aunties” and “uncles” of the society. Once I completed high school and was finally enjoying a summer with my family, the most common question I would get asked was whether I got into the University of British Columbia or not. It was 2008 and Simon Fraser University was a well-established institution. However, when I chose to go to SFU instead of UBC, the society spoke up. My parents had to clear up that I was offered admission into both schools, and I chose SFU. Any youth of my generation who chose to attend any other schools besides UBC would be looked at as someone of lesser intelligence. Students go through grueling times in their senior year of high school, and massive amounts of stress and depression deciding which post-secondary institution they want to attend. Yet within the Bengali community, all that hard work is overlooked if a student does not attend the institution they consider to be the best.

Most of our family friends in Canada are treated like they are our blood relatives, since most parents left their own families and friends behind in Bangladesh. Hence, it is crucial for parents to attend Bengali gatherings we refer to as *dawaats* or *onusthaan*. Similar to meeting and greeting guests if they came to our own house, I would have to comport myself the same way whenever I attended these *dawaats*. It was and still is crucial to keep myself from talking to girls of my age to avoid any potential gossip, as it is considered that a male and female cannot have a friendly conversation without underlying interest. Since Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country, most people also consider Muslim traditions to be part of Bengali culture. A Bengali girl not only has to worry about being presentable or “*shalin*,” but must also avoid situations where she gets caught speaking to another Bengali boy either during a gathering or out somewhere in public. The ideology of the elders is that before marriage a Bengali girl and a boy should not be seen together in public, even if they are only friends; it is considered taboo. Western culture completely goes against this ideology and the way youths are viewed.

It seems that Bengali elders who come to Canada somehow do not completely conform to Western cultural norms, and view many of these norms as taboo. Since I grew up in British Columbia, I have also attended many Western social gatherings or parties. In Western society, I was not expected to be obedient or follow certain rules to maintain my image. I realized I could be completely myself around my friends without being judged for

who I am. My Western identity did not put limitations on my personality; however, this part of me found it difficult to adjust to Bengali society as I grew older. I always welcomed a good debate no matter who was on the opposing side. In a traditional Bengali society, youths are not eligible to have debates with their elders since they will consider it *"beyadobi,"* or we will simply be told that we are not old or experienced enough to debate on any topic. Most of my Bengali male friends who were raised here not only avoid Bengali gatherings but also do not put much thought into their social image in our community. However, it has always been an issue for me to balance my Western mentality with the Bengali ideologies I have been raised with in order to preserve an ideal image for the sake of my family's reputation.

6. CONCLUSION

Migrating and navigating through Western society is a difficult task for any immigrant family. Bengali youths who were not born into this society face an identity crisis in balancing out their true selves. Our parents expect us to stay loyal to our cultural and religious ideologies; however, Western culture may often create a roadblock in between us and our parents' ideologies. The growing up process is already difficult for many of us since we not only have to understand how to navigate in the Western world, but must also realize the sacrifices our parents are making for to give us a better future and thus try to stay true to our roots. This creates scenarios where we may feel obligated to shape ourselves a certain way that we normally would if we grew up in Bangladesh. As the eldest son in my family, I had to conduct myself in such a way that I inspired my sister to stay on the "right path" and gave my family support and security. I found inspiration in movies where the eldest son must make hard choices as to how they balanced their lifestyle. However, every human being is their own individual, and often these responsibilities come across as very overwhelming for a young adult. Finally, the constant pressure of being the ideal Bengali boy just so society does not speak ill of you creates detachment from Bengali society. There is a detachment from Western society as well when most of our identity is shaped by Bengali culture and expectations. In order to preserve our families' reputation, many of us youths must learn and adapt to the proper ways to interact with the Bengali community, which ultimately creates an identity crisis as we can never be completely Western or Bengali. This constant drama is no less dramatic than scenes from our favourite television shows or movies. Most movies and television shows are fictional, especially the ones made under the Bollywood banner. However, human beings are often able to connect to characters and find realism within these fictional stories, and I was no different. I call my life "filmy" because there was never any lack of drama as I grew up. Characters that fascinated me also inspired me to make better life choices since films would always show the consequences of good and bad decisions. I am proud to be the man I am today all because of my family. Their guidance and sacrifices molded me to become a strong individual, but along this journey there were constant surprises, struggles, and commotion. The concept of dual identities may cause Bengali youths to experience a "filmy" life wherein they must live a double role as both a Western and a Bengali individual.