

Drawing Lines: Henna, Identity, and Queerness in *The Henna Wars*

Gurleen Buttar, Simon Fraser University

Introduction

Nishat, a Queer Muslim Bangladeshi girl, challenges the stereotype of Queer Young Adult (YA) romance stories by representing an invisible community. Written by Adiba Jaigirdar, the character Nishat in *The Henna Wars* carves parallels between the traditional and sacred practices of Muslim Bengali culture and the endeavours of young Queer people. Layers of discrimination challenge Nishat's identity: from homophobia within her ethnic Bengali culture to the homophobia and racism she experiences within the Western Irish culture at her all-girls Catholic school. Cultural surveillance and isolation push Nishat to use henna as a way to connect herself to her South Asian roots and her femininity. The use of henna throughout the novel also acts as a catalyst for the sapphic enemies-to-lovers plot between her and Flavia, a closeted bisexual Brazilian girl at her school, associating the acceptance of Queer sexuality with cultural celebration and traditionalism. Henna, or *mehndi*, is a botanical plant that can be ground into a paste to stain the hands or feet with intricate designs. Women commonly adorn it during celebratory events such as weddings or Eid across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. This paper aims to understand how Jaigirdar represents the complex identity of Queer South Asian Muslim girls through cultural and religious practices and norms by answering how henna indexes identity.

Being Queer Within Her Cultural and Religious Upbringing

Bengali society, like many South Asian cultures, passes down traditionalist ideology regarding sexuality, gender roles, marriage, and family structures. These communities function as collective societies, promoting assimilation into groups that are characterized by protection, loyalty, and obedience from birth to death (Dutta 220). Family association helps dictate social status and consequently privilege, esteem, protection, community, and support systems. To be ostracized by a community or family within a collective society forces individuals to rely on themselves, making them extremely vulnerable. Long-term survival outside of someone's family can be unstable and risky because it puts the individual at a

significantly lower social status and limits their chances of securing a marriage. Marriage joins families together, allowing communities to gain higher social status or wealth and esteem. Therefore, the growth of family and community also gives people strength and power. The importance of marriage is marked early in *The Henna Wars* when Sonny Appu's wedding serves as a trigger for Nishat to come out to her parents. She is hoping to be received with acceptance and a vision of a future marriage that would make her parents joyful and proud, despite her romantic interest going against the traditional norms of Bengali customs (11).

Hierarchical attitudes regarding social status and gendered power dynamics are normal within Bangladeshi society, emphasizing masculine and feminine norms. These conservative values dictate heteronormative family structures, roles, and responsibilities—especially regarding child-rearing—with a masculine power hierarchy. Marriage acts as the ultimate form of social networking, allowing marginalized and elite groups to build networks with people of similar status that strengthen an unequal structure (Dutta 221). Nishat braves going against the norm because her parents have previously defied it by choosing to have a love marriage. Choosing a spouse is an individualistic action uncommon for traditional Bangladeshi unions, where parents arrange a marriage with the most socially suitable or economically beneficial partner. The shame and dishonour that follow this decision continue to haunt Nishat's Ammu and Appu, for they were criticized and humiliated for going against their parents' wishes (117). They became ignominious for their selfish choices, a stigmatization that continued when they moved and integrated into a Western country, forcing them to be critical of how their family's choices are reflected in their community. However, when Nishat comes out to her parents, they respond in refusal, fear, and shame, emphasizing that Nishat has the choice of being gay and humiliating her parents further, or protecting her family's dignity by pretending to be straight and rejecting her queerness (118). Marrying a girl would put her family at risk of alienation and ostracism for supporting homosexuality and supporting the production of a family dynamic that would not pass down the attitudes of a traditional family dynamic. They would fall to the bottom of the social class hierarchy and be subjected to public humiliation at cultural and religious gatherings, a detrimental event within their culture.

Parallels between culture and religion blend for many Bengali people within the diaspora. The movement of people throughout history has also resulted in the merging and acquisition of cultural and religious practices. While both influence behaviours, beliefs, and collective identity, each can mutually dictate the formation

of laws and social norms. Ostracism, harassment, bullying, assault, and institutional neglect make Bangladesh's conservative society dangerous and hostile for people to be Queer (Macdonald 8). Same-sex intercourse is outlawed in Bangladesh with the punishment of life in prison (Macdonald 1), a sentiment commonly registered within Islam. Under Shariah law in the Quran, "homosexuality is criminalized under Hadd punishment" (Hendricks 44), a categorization of fixed punishments based on "limits (prescribed by) God" (Rahman 237). While the Quran is the edifice of Islam, the Hadith serves as a testament to the prophet Mohammad. The Hadith is the ideology, teachings, and actions of the prophet Muhammad, which influences the "mindset of early Muslims and the kind of early leadership that shaped the face of Islam" (Hendricks 33). Justifications for hate crimes against homosexuals and sexual minorities commonly stem from the Hadith (Hendricks 33).

Sonny Apu preaches a similar sentiment to Nishat, claiming "Muslims aren't gay" (100). She claims queerness is a "sickness" (101), demonstrating a belief that queerness can be cured and reversed with the right remedy. Attributing mental illness to Nishat's sexuality identifies her personhood as a hazard, pushing her self-perception into disorder. In Bangladesh, Queer people are commonly prescribed anti-psychotics for the abnormality of their sexuality when seeking medical advice and assistance (Macdonald 11). Failing to understand that queerness is not a Western ideology that can be picked up and practiced creates the misconception that queerness is a choice of morals that can be denied and unlearned. Her family believes Nishat has subconsciously picked up lesbianism from TV, films, and books (100). Her Ammu displays similar anxieties regarding Nishat's influence on her sister Priti when they engage in conversation about Instagram, distracting Priti from her studies (93). Pushed by the belief that queerness comes as a result of being unfocused and succumbing to media propaganda, Nishat gets affection and acceptance from her parents when they see that she is focused on her academics. They throw her a celebratory *dawat* (158) because they believe she is doing the right thing by re-focusing on a future suitable for a Bengali girl and getting over her lesbianism.

The *dawat* (a Bengali feast and social gathering) also showcases how important it is to show face in Bengali customs: proudly presenting achievements and blessings to the community or family to maintain a positive face. She understands that there is rejoicing in the community when she makes her people proud. The underlying threat of consequences if she chooses to bring shame to her family is highlighted by reminding her what she is risking. Nishat is tormented by the belief that her

family will do something drastic when she has brought too much shame and dishonour to them by conflicting with her community's religion and risking the collective cultural structure. Nishat realizes that she is a problem case, "a family matter" that needs to be discussed and solved outside of her earshot but still within a small circle of confidants (100). Her apprehension is present every time she feels alienated from her parents' warmth and affection. Interestingly, Nishat's sexual identity is unwavering throughout the novel despite moments like these causing her internal conflict and pain, because she is aware of the discriminatory restrictions in between the rare acknowledgment and connection she gets.

Henna as a Connection to Community

Over centuries of migration and assimilation practices, religious ideologies and cultural practices in South Asia get blended and muddled, including the traditional practice of henna. Jaigirdar introduces henna as a part of a Muslim-Bengali wedding tradition for the bride and female relatives to adorn on their hands in celebration. Diasporic communities in the Western world have been observed to maintain some aspects of traditional Muslim weddings, like some forms of the *Mehndi* (Rozario and Samuel 360), but are mixed with their ethnic cultural traditions, making distinctions between race and religion in weddings quite difficult. The adornment of henna for a South Asian bride can signify marriage, fertility, and femininity. The Hindu origin story of henna similarly attributes henna to traditional femininity within a heteronormative society. Parvati, the mother goddess and symbol of fertility is depicted in the *dinya kath* or divine story wearing henna to please her husband Shiva (Miczak 204). Parvati's archetype links henna to fertility and marriage, while implying its application is to fulfill the expectant role of a woman: as amiable and someone who prioritizes beautifying herself for her husband.

Documentations of henna practices can be found trailing the spread of Islam, with origin stories dating back to Fatima, the prophet Mohammad's daughter (Miczak 203). Though she may be considered to be the first influential woman to adorn it, Miczak points out that henna stains must have been used and adorned by women in Mecca before Fatima for Mohammad (c. 600 AD) to fall in love with it (Miczak 203). The adornment of henna during the festivities of Eid—a Muslim celebration of the end of Ramadan—is also common. Therefore, we can assume that the exclusivity that Nishat expresses as a henna artist is tied to both her religious and cultural background. She claims to do henna because it is "a part of [her] culture" making it inappropriate for others to practice the craft if it is not

engraved within their culture, as with Flavia's situation (111). There is also a marked difference between the two girls' styles of art: Flavia creates sharp, edged patterns (96), and Nishat pulls from Bangladeshi styles such as the Peacock (235), mandalas, flowers, and leaves (96).

Nishat's henna connects her to her grandmother who had practiced the craft in Bangladesh since she was Nisha's age. When Nishat and her sister would visit her in Bangladesh, her Nanu would "spend hours applying intricate beautiful patterns to [their] palms" (20). The time and experience of application suggest bonding with family and other female relatives or community members. Despite the distance, the lineal connection of henna being passed down in her family signifies a stronger connection to a collective culture, where the teachings of ancestors and elders are passed down. Nishat considers how the craft could have been a family tradition because her Ammu had also dabbled in the craft, but long left it when moving to Ireland and had no one to practice on (79). Now, Nishat practices similar styles, aiming to perfect the craft to her Nanu's calibre. Henna takes place within a collective community, where business and opportunity rely on the support of fellow community members. Despite the homophobia within her community, Nishat relies on her community's appraisal of her work. While showcasing her work online, she feels comforted and hopeful for the future of her business when Desi people appreciate her designs (77). Again, during her celebratory *dawat* she hopes the aunties there will admire her work enough to pay her to do it during Eid (158). She is also able to outsource her business to the public by setting up shop within her Abbu's restaurant. Financial prospects, clientele, business growth, and protection are all dependent on her reputation and a public image that is acceptable to the community—which could be harmed by coming out as a lesbian. This proves true when trying to outsource business to her white classmates at school, and she is met with disparagement of her henna stall after being outed (188).

Indexing Femininity and Sexuality

Nishat's ability to do henna helps index her feminine qualities making her more accepted within her community. There are strict gender roles apparent within traditional Bangladeshi culture and Islam. Connections to bridal tradition and historical religious beings depicting henna strictly adorned by female bodies, suggests the practice is strictly for females. Despite there being male characters that acknowledge the henna within the novel, no adult male body adorns it, emphasizing the strict binary norms surrounding the practice. By practicing the beautifying ritual, and keeping the craft to other female community members, she

is upholding the traditional gender binary norm and her traditional religious and cultural values. Upholding henna as a strictly feminine practice helps display an image of heteronormality to her community, saving her and her family from possible rejection and ostracization.

Disregarding the possibility of doing henna on men may be a reflection of her Muslim background. Online discussion threads about contemporary Muslim ideology suggest that henna on boys is considered inappropriate because it has been customary for women to adorn it, and by wearing henna men and boys are imitating women (see, for example, Azka *r/muslim*). Within the Western diaspora, modern views around gender encourage men, including Queer men and gender-diverse people to adorn henna. While it is not as popularized, it is not completely unheard of. Uddin from *Them* shares stories from Queer South Asian people, predominantly men and non-binary people, who adorn henna as a way to explore a natural pull to femininity, goddess-like energy, or their “divine femininity” (Uddin). Many Queer men and non-binary people are marginalized from their South Asian community, so embodying a “motherly figure” with the help of henna encourages support and the formation of a new—more welcoming—community (Uddin).

This notion of imitating the opposite gender is largely considered haram in Muslim customs and goes against teachings within the Hadith. It was narrated by Abu Hurairah, a close companion to the prophet Mohhamad and narrator of many Hadith verses, “that the Messenger of Allah cursed women who imitate men and men who imitate women” [English translation] (Sunan Ibn Majah Hadith 59). The Quran and Hadith are primarily addressed to heteronormative demographics, and of course contemporary terms such as homosexual, transgender, or non-binary are not used. The description of mukhanathans replaces some of these concepts in the Hadith, referencing their appearance and role in society through stories of them interacting with the prophet. They were publicly effeminate, “languid men (in body and voice/both involuntary and voluntary)” (Rowson 673), who “adapted feminine adornment” like henna on their hands and feet (675) and were not attracted to women (675). Blatant displays of cross-dressing were uncommon during the early period of Islam, aside from the muhanathans, but once brought to the prophet’s notice they were banished (Rowson 673). The public display of henna helps identify the mukhanathan’s femininity as well as homosexuality. The teaching vilifies practicing actions outside of the binary norm, also implying that by practicing henna as a Muslim man, one is going against God’s blessings and ordinance.

Practicing henna may be a technique Nishat uses to keep hold of her identity as a South Asian Muslim, balancing it with being a Queer person struggling to gain acceptance within her community. Practicing a traditional feminine craft may have made it easier for her parents to accept her sexuality because she is presenting a traditionally feminine image, one that has been connected to conservative, heteronormative relationship dynamics. Nishat's Ammu asks Nishat not to cut off her hair, assuming it is a physical identifier of lesbianism. She uses Ellen DeGeneres's short hair as an example. Claiming she "looks like a lesbian" because "her hair is so short," Ammu is baffled when she learns that Ellen's long-haired wife is not bisexual (266). The prospect of appearing to be straight to her community makes the small Queer community invisible. Although this may be the reality for many Queer South Asian Muslims, it limits Jaigirdar's intentions of providing a story for identities that are not often depicted in mainstream media (Rajurkar). Ultimately, readers relating to Nishat's identity get the message that people should still abide by cultural norms.

Conflict in the Irish Community

In the case of Nishat, her identity has been shaped by her Western upbringing along with the social and religious expectations within the Bangladeshi-Bengali diaspora. Nishat's personhood is "living, breathing proof" that being gay and a Muslim are not mutually exclusive (100). Nor is being gay a criminal offence in Ireland, compared to Bangladeshi culture. Within her Irish-Catholic school, her identity as a Muslim faces constant criticism because she is different from the majority White-Catholic population. She gets pestered with questions about the modesty of her religion, regardless that she is not properly practicing it (113). Being subjected to racist rumours and insensitive questions about her religion erodes her level-headedness.

The resulting conflict of being condemned for her sexuality within her religion and ethnic culture and for her religion and ethnic culture in Irish society causes Nishat to feel a constant stream of stress, anxiety, and sadness. Her support systems are limited to her sister, best friends, and Flavia (her school crush), which progressively destabilizes as Nishat struggles to fare against homophobia and racism. Her sexuality goes against the school's Catholic ethos, according to her anonymous classmate (167). Nishat's autonomy and identity get swept from under her when her choice is taken away, feeling as if she's "become a passive in [her] own life" (167). Being outed to the entire school and receiving more stigmatization and discrimination further destabilizes her rationality.

This only pushes her to go to extreme lengths to ensure she beats Flavia's henna business in the competition, assuming she has outed her. Nishat is angry and frustrated that Flavia is claiming her cultural tradition (henna) by practicing it as an artist, rather than adorning it as a supportive gesture of celebration in an appropriate context. This fervour for progressing her business over Flavia's may be due to henna and the class business competition being a tangible, physical practice that keeps her pushing through the disparities she faces because of her identity (125). She has control over her work and her business, giving her a sense of security when she has little control over the effects of her identity. Surveillance of a collective society, isolation of being Queer and unaccepted within her culture, and discrimination within her school community push Nishat to use henna as a means of coping with the hardships that come her way. It quiets her mind because it requires focus and purposeful intent while doing it, and henna gives her happiness when she receives admiration and support for her completed work (22).

The act of applying henna on Flavia progresses intimacy and trust between the two girls, showing an acceptance of self-identity for both. Henna progresses Nishat's romance with Flavia by bringing them both physically close. This gives Nishat a chance to explore her romantic feelings and desires for Flavia, marvelling over small touches, close proximity, and the trust Flavia has for Nishat's skillset to do her henna. This also provides for moments of vulnerability and romance as they share kisses, finally acknowledging each other's feelings for one another (239). Although Flavia struggles to understand the problem of cultural appropriation with her practicing the craft, she uses henna as a way to try to connect with Nishat, after bonding over it at the wedding they initially met at (237). The progression of the sapphic enemies-to-lovers trope through henna ties the practice into their romance, imbuing the craft with their sexuality.

Acceptance Through Henna

Henna provides Nishat opportunities to gain acceptance with her classmates and her own self-identity. It is also used as a vessel for reconciling her relationship with her mother since coming out.

Despite the past tensions between Nishat and her mother, Ammu shows her support by coming to her business display during her school's business competition gallery. She still wants Nishat to do her henna despite her stall being vandalized by her classmates for being gay, just prior. The application process provides a bonding experience for the two, when her Ammu and Appu can see the violent behaviours that occur due to Nishat being a minority (257). This

triggers her mother to relate her own experiences of needing to fit in and be accepted in a community and family (267). By the end of the application, her mother praises her work, showing that she is proud of her daughter, a sentiment of love and acknowledgment to Nishat (257). In this sense, henna is again depicted as a practice of bonding.

Similarly, girls in her class come to get their henna done as a sign of support and respect when Nishat sets up a henna booth in her father's restaurant, admiring the work enough to pay Nishat. She notes this experience is the "first time anything resembling respect has been aimed at [her] from [her] fellow classmates" (231). This is a significant moment of acknowledgment and acceptance, given that her classmates outed her to the entire school and often subjected Nishat to forms of homophobia and racism. Here the practice of henna is a signifier of cultural pride. After she is outed, girls will still come to her to get henna done, further signifying henna as a craft of pride and acceptance.

Conclusion

Through the character of Nishat, the novel explores how traditional cultural practices can both reinforce and challenge societal norms. Henna serves as a powerful tool for Nishat to assert her identity and navigate the intersections of her queerness, her Muslim faith, and her South Asian heritage. It allows her to claim a space within her community while also challenging the boundaries of what is considered acceptable within that space, providing Nishat with a sense of grounding and belonging. The shared experiences with henna between Nishat and Flavia highlight the potential for cultural practices to foster understanding and acceptance of identity. As Nishat uses henna to bond with her family, classmates, and community, henna becomes a symbol of resilience and empowerment. Her ability to maintain her queerness in the face of societal pressures and cultural expectations speaks to the strength and courage required to live authentically. The unique intersectionality between race, religion, and sexuality in Jaigirdar's narrative resonates with readers who feel invisible or misrepresented by mainstream media, providing a sense of validation and belonging. This paper hopes to contribute to a greater understanding of how cultural symbols like henna can be reimagined and reclaimed by those seeking acceptance and self-affirmation. By doing so, it aims to offer solace and solidarity to those who, like Nishat, are navigating the challenges of living authentically in a world that often demands conformity.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Azka [Jeunzka]. "What's Wrong with Putting a Little Henna on My Little Brother (8 y/o)?" *Reddit r/Muslim*, Apr. 2024, www.reddit.com/r/Muslim/comments/1c2qv6x/whats_wrong_with_putting_a_little_henna_on_my/.
- "Eid al-Fitr." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 17 Jul. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eid-al-Fitr>.
- Dutta, Bipasha. "Role of Culture in Decision Making Approach in Bangladesh: An Analysis from the Four Cultural Dimension of Hofstede." *Copula: Jahangirnagar University Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 32, June 2015, pp. 215–226.
- Hadith 59*. Vol 3. Translated by Sunnah.com. Sunan Ibn Majah, 1903.
- Hastings, Dan. "How Henna Is Helping Proudly Brown and Queer Individuals Reconnect with Their Heritage." *British Vogue*, 19 June 2022, www.vogue.co.uk/beauty/article/henna-mehndi-lgbtqia.
- Hendricks, Muhsin. "Islamic Texts: A Source for Acceptance of Queer Individuals into Mainstream Muslim Society." *The Equal Rights Review*, vol. 5, 2010, pp. 31–51.
- Jaigirdar, Adiba. *The Henna Wars*. Page Street Publishing, 2022.
- Jetzer2223. "What Are People's General Attitudes towards Men Wearing Henna?" *Reddit r/Henna*, Apr. 2024, www.reddit.com/r/henna/comments/1bpohya/what_are_peoples_general_attitudes_towards_men/.
- Macdonald, Geoffrey. "Understanding the Lives of Bangladesh's LGBTI Community." *International Republican Institute*, 19 Jan. 2022, www.iri.org/resources/iri-conducts-innovative-mixed-method-lgbti-study-in-bangladesh/.
- Miczak, Marie Anakee. *Henna's Secret History: The History, Mystery & Folklore of Henna*. Writers Club Press, 2001.
- Rajurkar, Anuradha. "Interview with Adiba Jaigirdar, #Roaring20sdebut Author of *the Henna Wars*." *Anuradha Rajurkar, Author*, 15 Apr. 2020, <https://www.anuradharajurkar.com/blogs/news/what-is-the-henna-wars-about>.
- Rahman, Fazlur. "The Concept of Ḥadd in Islamic Law." *Islamic Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1965, pp. 237–51.
- Rowson, Everett K. "The Effeminates of Early Medina." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 111, no. 4, Oct. 1991, pp. 671–693, [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/603399](https://doi.org/10.2307/603399).

Rozario, Santi, and Geoffrey Samuel. "Gender, religious change and sustainability in Bangladesh." *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2010, pp. 354–364, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2010.02.009>.

Uddin, Shahamat. "How Queer and Trans Desis Are Breaking the Binary with Henna." *Them*, 8 July 2022, www.them.us/story/queer-desi-henna.

Zahed, Ludovic-Mohamed. "Part 1 – Intersectionality: Who Are Queer Muslims?" *LGBT Musliman-Es : Du Placard Aux Lumieres: Face Aux Obscurantismes et Aux Homonationalismes*, translated by Adi S. Bharat, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, pp. 1–29.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Grammarly web extension for correcting my spelling and grammar, Citationmachine for formatting my MLA citations for academic journals and websites, and Dr. Nicky Didicher for her help in developing ideas and guidance about this topic. I would also like to acknowledge Annasarchive for providing a downloadable version of the book *The Henna Wars*. I would also like to thank Avani for helping me proofread my paper and Manisha being so open about sharing her struggles coming out to her family with me.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).