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**SPLIT BETWEEN CULTURES:
NEGOTIATING MY BENGALI AND WESTERN GIRLHOOD**

1. INTRODUCTION

Bengali youth in Canada feel a strong need to negotiate between two cultures and nationalisms, whether they are immigrants or Canadian-born. Assimilation and negotiation of different competing nations are significant aspects in shaping one's identity as a Bengali youth. These negotiations determine the positions available to Bengali youth in society as well as in family life from a young age.

In this essay, I will be discussing my personal journey of negotiation between two identities in this Canadian Bengali Diaspora. The first part will discuss immigration and navigation; I will mainly articulate the common obstacles that many immigrant families such as my own encounter. The second section will contain my methods of negotiating and balancing being both Canadian and Bengali, as well as outline how both overlap with each other. This section will discuss the intersections of my identity that are affected by both cultures. The final part will consist of a discussion specifically related to my girlhood as both Western and Bengali. This is where I will discuss how being a Canadian Bengali girl has shaped my upbringing in Canada, and the ways in which I must navigate and make compromises through both identities in order to combine my two worlds.

2. IMMIGRATION AND NAVIGATION

I was born in Bangladesh in 1995 and spent my first four years of life there with my parents. Looking back at pictures and memories, those four years were the happiest years for me and my family. My father had a job at a top lab in Dhaka as a Zoologist and made an upper-middle class income. My mother stayed at home to take care of me, never letting me out of her sight. We were able to live comfortably and happily in a decent sized apartment in Dhaka. Money was not an issue and my father worked hard to make sure our lives were pleasant. In April 2000, we immigrated to British Columbia, Canada. I do not remember the journey getting here; however, I do remember the storm that followed shortly after.

For my parents, Canada was the Golden Nation for immigrants. They had a goal in mind, and that was a better future for my sister and me. As mentioned above, in Bangladesh, my father had a PhD in Zoology, and a well-paid job which allowed our family to live comfortably and contentedly in Dhaka. He was born and raised in West Bengal, specifically in Memary and Bhordhoman. He grew up poor in a *graam* (village) and education was a scarce privilege. Luckily for him, his father was a teacher, and found ways

to educate his children. My father grew up with a drive to be the first person from his village to come to Canada. This was considered an impossible and delusional goal for a poor man's son. My mother, on the other hand, was raised in a drastically different environment. She was born and raised in Dhaka, and her family was financially well-off and upper-middle class. She had opportunities to travel the world and have diverse work experiences, such as being an intern for the United Nations. She rarely had financial struggles, and lived a comfortable life. When my parents got married, it was a story of two very different worlds coming together. Because of their drastically different upbringing both economically and culturally, adjusting to the immigrant lifestyle was undoubtedly difficult. When we immigrated to British Columbia, we lived in a very small one bedroom apartment, where my parents, my 8-month-old-sister, and I all slept.

The building we lived in was occupied by a couple of other Bangladeshi families. Having people from our own country was the most comforting feeling for my family. Immigrating to a country after leaving those who are closest to you can create anxiety and depression in many immigrant family members, especially adults. My parents both experienced the distress that comes from feeling alienated from the community and the culture in which your identity is rooted. From a young age, I could see the significance of having a sense of belonging and community. Living in a building filled with immigrants gave my parents a safe space, which many immigrants do not have. Our new friends shared the same language, religion, and culture as us, which allowed us to feel somewhat at home.

Coming from a middle-class economic standing in Bangladesh to having almost nothing created many obstacles for my family, just as it did for many other immigrant families. I suddenly went from having many different toys to having only a couple. I was four years old when we moved to Canada; however, even at that age I could glean that my family was going through financial hardship. I could see the pain in my father's eyes when we would go to the grocery store and he could not buy me and my sister a chocolate bar or potato chips. I did not ask for anything, as I understood the struggles my family was experiencing; I dared not even look at treats or toys. As the oldest child, I experienced firsthand how life was suddenly shaped by fights and arguments over money, security, and the future. I heard arguments where my mother asked why we had come to Canada in the first place, as the "Golden Nation" had suddenly become a misadventure for an upper-class city girl. My parents persisted through the economic hardship, as difficult as it was, because they still believed in their dreams of a better future for my sister and me. From a young age, I have carried the tensions of money and familial stress. Feelings of anxiety and self-esteem issues came along with these common stresses. Many immigrant families have to face these same challenges. Many highly credentialed and educated people come to Canada for better security and stability, but are ultimately forced to work as labourers performing various types of manual work in order to survive. My family went from being upper-middle class to being working class, and the transition was sudden. These experiences can be an aspect or even the root of anxiety and depressive disorders in immigrants. I like to consider my family to be somewhat lucky because we were able to find a small Bengali community that became a social escape from our stressful lives.

3. DUAL IDENTITIES

Moving on from the beginning of my immigration journey, we come to my journey of assimilation and negotiation. I am a Bangladesh-born, Canadian-raised, Bengali girl. I have two identities, two nationalities, two cultures, and two environments. Most of my life has been a duality between my Bengali self and my Western self. These two identities may coexist; however, both cause advantages and disadvantages when combined. It is a constant struggle of mine, as well as many Bengali youths, to find the balance between these two lives. In order to find balance, negotiation and compromise are occasionally necessary. However, conflict arises when we find that one aspect of our identity does not mesh well with the other. I believe that many Bengali youths, as well as youths from other complex cultural backgrounds, struggle with negotiating both identities. We wonder where we truly fit in. If I am not completely Bengali, nor am I completely Canadian, then where is my place?

My parents have always made sure that we go to every Canada Day parade dressed in red and white. I knew that Christmas was not a celebratory holiday for Muslims; regardless, my parents would take us to every Christmas function at school. They would buy Christmas cards and gifts for my teachers as well. On the other hand, they also took us to every *Boishaki* (Bengali New Year). We dressed in traditional *sharees* and put flowers in our hair. My parents would take us to many *dawats* (Bengali gatherings) and reciprocated the favour by cooking many Bengali dishes and desserts. We knew that having a *dawat* meant cleaning the house until it was spotless, watching my mom cook for two days straight, and dressing up in *salwar kameez* (Indian suits) while waiting for our family friends to arrive. My parents did their best to balance both cultures, so we would be educated in both. They wanted us to be patriotic Canadians, without losing our Bengali heritage.

I use the phrase “not here nor there” as I believe it is the perfect explanation for how the Bengali diaspora is perceived according to both Western and Bengali perspectives. Bengali youths are seen as not completely Bengali. For example, when I last went to Bangladesh in 2008, there seemed to be an aura around me that made it evident that I was a Westerner. I did not have fair skin, nor did I wear distinct Western clothing, so I was quite confused as to how/why strangers viewed us as just “*bideshi*.” I was born in Bangladesh, and was well aware of the cultural expectations and mannerisms. When I went to many relatives’ homes, they would be in complete shock when I ate with my hands as is customary, as it was expected I would not know how to. Many people spoke to me in broken English, under the impression that I, a *bideshi* Bengali, would not know how to speak *Bangla*. Many of my cousins would be extremely excited to see their “*bideshi*” cousin. They were asked to speak only English with me, for their own practice. The curiosity and excitement are understandable; however, it is unfortunate that I will never be considered a true Bangladeshi. I have come across many international students in Vancouver who seem to have a perception of Canadian-raised Bengalis as uncultured or “white-washed.” I have experienced teasing for not being able to understand common Bengali jokes or phrases, or for having a slight accent when I speak *Bangla*. My accent and language, my Canadian upbringing, and my lack of knowledge on Bangladesh’s local culture create a boundary between the “true” Bangladesh and myself.

My Canadian identity also has some limitations and boundaries. At first glance, there would be no assumption that I am Canadian, as to be truly Canadian in the imagination of most is to be white. White Canadians will rarely be asked where they are originally from, as it is assumed that they are true Canadians. Even when it is known that I am a Canadian citizen, I will still be asked where I am really from, as there is an assumption that my skin colour does not make me a real Canadian. The discourse here is that, if you are a racialized person, you are indefinitely from somewhere else. As I was raised in Canada for essentially 18 years of my life, I would want to reply by saying that I am from Canada. However, because I was not born here, and because my physical features are “ethnic,” I am obligated to say that I am from Bangladesh. This is a complex situation as I am technically not from Bangladesh either. I do not feel as though I belong in or to Bangladesh. I have often received connotative compliments of looking “exotic.” Looking “exotic” essentially means being unusual, different, or foreign. Being called “exotic” puts me in the category of the ethnic other. Simone de Beauvoir’s term “the other” is what I would use to describe my place in comparison to the white Canadian subject. I am not seen as being the same or equal to the white person who is the subject. My body is automatically racialized due to my skin colour and ethnic facial features.

Most of my childhood was spent in a neighbourhood that had a demographic of predominantly racialized people. I did not feel out of place or discriminated against due to my race until I moved to a predominantly white neighbourhood and school. At this point, looking at my reflection in the mirror or pictures of myself started to generate internalized racist feelings towards my skin colour. This anxiety around my dark colour derived from the cultural ideology of dark skin being unattractive or not ideal. At Bengali gatherings, I would overhear the women talking about particular girls looking like fairies because of their *forsha* skin (fair skin). I did not consciously take this information to heart, however I found myself editing my photos to make my skin look brighter and more fair. I did not purposely do it to make my skin lighter; I simply thought I looked more attractive this way. This was an obvious indication of my internalized feelings about my own dark skin.

Negotiating language was also a crucial part of my identity as a Bengali Canadian. *Bangla* is my first language. When I first came to Canada, I only knew a handful of English terms and phrases. I learned English through watching television, and also through interactions at school. I was put into ESL for a little while in Kindergarten and was a very fast learner as I copied and adapted to other people speaking proper English. Many people would be surprised at the fact that I did not have any distinct accent. They would not believe me when I said that I was an immigrant, as all immigrants are stereotyped to have accents and not be able to speak “proper” English. My being able to speak English without an accent while being an immigrant was astonishing to many people. Perhaps this was something to be proud of. To white people, I spoke English perfectly without an accent; however, my parents had a different opinion. They would ask my sister and me why we did not speak English like white people. They always wondered why there was always a slight accent or tone to my voice, and why I did not sound like a white person.

My parents spoke *Bangla* to each other and to me while I was growing up. I understood *Bangla* quite well, and could speak it minimally. Much of my *Bangla* was mixed with English. I felt insecure speaking *Bangla* at Bengali gatherings, as I felt I would be criticized or humiliated. Coming from a family that is rooted in duality, the Bengali language became a medley of different dialects and pronunciation, as my father is from

West Bengal, and mother is from Bangladesh. I grew up speaking *Bangla* like my father, whereas my sister spoke like my mother. Although I absolutely loved the diversity in my Bengali family, speaking West Bengali *Bangla* in a majority-Bangladeshi community was uncomfortable. In many situations, if I said a word in Indian *Bangla*, I would be corrected into saying the word in “normal” *Bangla*. I found this “normal” *Bangla* concept bizarre, as Bangladesh itself has many diverse dialects. Correcting my West Bengali *Bangla* words is essentially articulating the underlying idea that my father’s Indian nationality and *Bangla* language was not seen as “normal” *Bangla*. I now speak with a mixture of both Bangladeshi *Bangla* and West Bengali *Bangla*, and am proud of it.

4. NEGOTIATING BENGALI AND WESTERN GIRLHOOD

Being a woman can be difficult in both the Western world and the Bengali world. It is especially difficult when there are set discourses on what the ideal woman looks like. In many cases, a girl is taught from when she is very young how she should look and behave. An ideal girl must be gentle, quiet, nice, obedient, modest, pure, heterosexual, smart but not overly smart, etc. In my personal experience, these expectations and ideals have shaped my entire identity. The ways in which my gender intersects with my ethnic culture, nationality, and religion have always created challenges and fissures.

I will first consider my gender and Bengali culture. As a Bengali girl, I have been brought up with many of the common discourses of being a girl in that culture. Growing up, I was known to be very obedient, soft-spoken, and passive. These characteristics earned me high praise in the Bengali community. My parents have always told me what a good girl I am and how I make them proud. The phrase “good girl” became less praise and more expectation. Being obedient had always been second nature to me, mainly because being disobedient had resulted in scolding and disappointment from my parents. Talking back and speaking my mind had also resulted in words such as “*shoytan*” (devil) or “*beyadob*” (disrespectful or naughty) being used to describe me. I was taught how to sit like a lady – with my legs closed or crossed – especially in front of men. Essentially, most things I know about being a girl ultimately relate to the interest of a man. For example, I have been taught to dress modestly and behave like a lady lest I incur negative attention from men. I must also be pure, soft-spoken, physically beautiful, etc., all for my future husband. These things are what both my Bengali culture and Western culture have taught me.

Attending Bengali gatherings were essential in order to keep close ties with the culture we had left in Bangladesh. For me, Bengali *dawats* meant dressing up in order to look presentable and preparing myself mentally for the “Aunty” gaze. This is a common phrase used by South Asian girls to describe the interesting culture of a group of middle-aged, married women scrutinizing Bengali girls. It came naturally for me to speak to the aunts and uncles in a soft and feminine manner. Conversations with adults were limited to small talk, as I was told not to speak too much. At these gatherings, Bengali girls from the age of 15 onward are constantly being watched. How we spoke, dressed, looked, and behaved was always a topic of discussion. What we did outside of gatherings in our “Western lives” was also a hot topic. Many Bengali girls have had this same experience of feeling as though they are constantly under a microscope. Hanging out with the opposite sex, at Bengali gatherings as well as outside of them, is treated as an immoral

act. Unfortunately, I sometimes feel as though this constant watching and critiquing of young Bengali girls is part of Bengali culture. When I went to Bengali gatherings, women would be in one room and men in the other, and the same for boys and girls. My mother used to always tell me to never sit with Bengali boys in the room, even if I had no other friends to keep me company at a *dawat*. I was told that “someone is always watching.” Girls who did talk to boys, or even sat with boys, were slut-shamed consistently. Even to this day, as an adult, I see the anxiety on my parents’ face if a Bengali male and I have a conversation or mingle at a gathering. For many of us Bengali youths, these situations are quite complicated and culturally confusing, as Bengali culture can clash drastically with our Western culture.

When a girl is being brought up, generally she is not existing for herself; instead, she is existing for others – first for her parents, then for her husband or for her in-laws, and then finally for her children. In order to reach the “ultimate” goal – marriage – a Muslim girl such as myself is expected to live life without a flaw. If she were to have flaws, she would be held accountable for them. My persona and the way I carry myself will determine what kind of girl I am.

Purity is one of the most essential aspects of being the perfect girl or woman. South Asian girls are supposedly embodiments of chastity and purity, which results in society policing our bodies. Our worth is determined by our chastity, and by our behaviour. Our family’s reputation is expected to be our responsibility, and is contingent on our chastity. Of course, being a virgin is also crucial if marriage is prospective; however, chastity can also be determined by one’s character. If a community member detects a Bengali girl with her partner, or even accompanied by a male, the news will surely reach her parents. Indeed, this could be called “being a good neighbour” or “watching out for the community’s girls”; however, I interpret this as an act of policing women’s bodies. I personally have been a victim of every Bengali girl’s worst nightmare: being exposed for my “Western” way of living. This happened when the community found out that I was dating, and my personal pictures were sent around to my Bengali community, finally reaching my parents. I was considered one of the community’s “gold options,” which meant that I had many offers for future suitors. Bengali community members are extremely efficient at “*ghotkali*” (matchmaking), which is why they would ask my mother to consider their sons, nephews, or grandsons as my future husband. Once it was “exposed” that I had been dating, I was off the market. My experience is evidence that once a girl is seen with the opposite sex in a romantic or sexual manner, her “value” decreases. As I mentioned previously, a woman’s body is only valuable when it conforms to people’s expectations of chastity and pureness. In my Western world, I am an independent person who is equal to men and does not have restrictions based on my gender. On the other hand, my Bengali world reminds me that a girl cannot be equal to a man. I have grown up witnessing the way community members do not discuss the behaviours and value of Bengali boys. The concept of “boys will be boys” rang in my ears. I always wonder why I am still not able to do what Bengali boys are, such as staying out late, wearing whatever I please, etc. It is interesting that amidst the harsh focus on the behaviour and reputation of Bengali girls, Bengali boys’ behaviour and reputation seems constantly to be swept under the rug.

Living in Canada will inevitably expose Bengali youths to Western culture, no matter the substantiality of Bengali culture in their lives. I have had many male friends throughout my life; however, once I entered high school, having male friends meant many boundaries

and limitations. I was often told from a young age never to let boys touch me, and vice versa. My parents did not restrict me from having male friends; their main concern was regarding romantic relationships and sexual attractions. I knew that dating was a very normal and common concept in the Western world, which was also my world, but because of my cultural restrictions I felt a barrier between my Western culture and myself. My parents always made it clear that I am not white; I am Bengali and Muslim, and therefore dating was restricted. It is true; I am Bengali. Yet I am being raised in a Western culture, and finding the balance is almost impossible. Being attracted to someone was understandable, but acting upon it was not. For Canadian Bengali girls like me, one part of our lives is always kept secret. For me, my Western identity was made up of constant secret phone calls, late night texting, etc. Dating was not considered a necessary part of my life in my Bengali culture. I admit that it saddened me not to be able to talk about my “boy problems” with my parents, as I knew many of my friends were able to talk to their parents about almost anything. This sense of dual identity and the awareness that I was constantly fighting between my Western identity and my Bengali identity caused me stress and anxiety in a way that is common among many Bengali youths.

5. CONCLUSION

The process from immigration to integration is complex terrain. Bengali youths raised in the West face a duality between two identities. Negotiating between these two identities is a challenging task that may create tensions and fissures in one’s lived reality. Throughout my life, I have been negotiating between my Western world and my Bengali world. It is not easy when both worlds are drastically different and often unable to mix. Negotiating between these worlds has meant having two separate lives, and mixing the two has created tension between my family and me as well as in my own self-perception and sense of being in the world. These tensions are created due to cultural and ideological differences that often feel insurmountable. I have found that trying to balance my two lives is an ongoing learning process, which is complicated especially by my positionality as a Bengali woman raised in the West. This positionality pushes me to negotiate between highly polarized expectations: Western expectations of independency and competency versus retaining my Bengali cultural heritage that values fixed gender roles and familial expectations. While Bengali immigrants are navigating their way through the Canadian Bengali diaspora, Canadian Bengali youths are navigating through both Western and Bengali cultures that build layered and multifaceted identities.

