

**CONSIDERATIONS OF VISIBILITY  
AND URBAN SPACE:  
THE EXPERIENCES OF  
MIGRANT WOMEN IN LONDON**

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL REQUIREMENT  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

**MA in Social Research**

**GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

Academic Year 2007 – 2008

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Page

Abstract IV

Acknowledgements V

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: Migration and Gender – Complex Patterns of Identity 4

1.1 Migration: Definition of a Complex Phenomenon 4

1.2 Migration and Gender: Which Identity for Women? 8

Chapter 2: The City – Imagination and Visibility of the Self 12

2.1 Imagining Dreamland: Narratives about a City 12

2.2 The Public Space and Notions of Performativity 16

Chapter 3: Bangladeshi Community Settlement in the UK 19

3.1 Banglatown and London – The Struggle for Cultural Identity 19

3.2 Bangladeshi Women in London – Experience of Self-Definition 21

Chapter 4: Methodology 24

4.1 Which Questions? 24

4.2 Which Methodology? 25

4.3 Participation and Semi-Structured Interviews 28

Chapter 5: Analysis and Results 30

5.1 First Interview 31

5.2 Second Interview 34

Chapter 6: Conclusion 40

Bibliography 43

Appendix: Transcript of the Semi-Structured Interviews 50

## **DEDICATION**

**To my mum.**

## **ABSTRACT**

One of the most discussed features of globalisation is the tension between cultural homogeneity and particular identities. In this context, London can be seen as an example of the way in which different social groups tend to re-create their own sense of community through traditions and social networks. However, the attempt of each ethnic group to create a specific kind of visibility within the urban space, can often lead to a lack of integration. Therefore, certain ethnic groups can experience the existence of an uncomfortable sense of exclusion.

The following dissertation is about researching a sense of London, as one of the most globalised and multicultural cities in the world, through the life experiences of migrant women. By recognising the urban space as a physical trace of a migrant's expectations and dreams, the city becomes the work-in-progress of an ongoing negotiation of identities.

In order to do this, I will assume that it is necessary to consider London as a map of identities. It is fundamental to understand the way in which migrants' identities are fulfilled in the new urban environment. The combination of experiences, embodiment and representation of "the self" within the urban space, allow me to recreate memories, perceptions and desires of personal fulfilment to the idea of London as an "imaginary space" before anything else.

The importance of this research lies in the fact that it contributes to the investigation of dynamic social processes in order to promote and facilitate a constructive cultural integration, rather than cultural assimilation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Over the course of the last year many people have helped me in many ways to complete this dissertation and I would like to extend my gratitude to them all.

First of all, I am grateful to my supervisor at Goldsmiths College, Professor Caroline Knowles, for her intellectual stimulation and guidance during the assessment and drafting of my ideas. I also owe a special debt of gratitude to Dr. Alison Rooke who has been equally supportive in shaping and addressing my personal interests. A special thought goes to Sheila Robinson, Secretary of the MA programmes, for her enormous patience and reassuring presence and to Peter Panayotou for his editorial assistance and other practical help.

My enormous debt, of course, goes to all my informants, the women of INP – Island Neighbourhood Project, for giving me the opportunity to enter their lives with simplicity and respect. I would like to express a special thanks to Sally Yoxall and Thahmina, both Project Coordinator and Development Worker of INP, for their support and availability during the field work.

Finally, thank you to my mum for her constant presence in my life, her encouragement, and for being an example of strength and wisdom. I would like to mention all my friends for being so supportive during these two years starting from my 'English family' Alejandra, Ania and Diego, Ilaria, Laura, Natalie-Ann, Manolo, Valeska, Cecilia, and Enrico. A special mention to Jacopo for being so patient and so positive, to whom I feel enormously grateful for allowing me to see the world in a way that would otherwise have remained unknown to me.

## INTRODUCTION

The following dissertation is the result of two years of studies focused on gender, identity and urban space. Here, my aims are to analyse patterns of identity, memories and representation of migrant women in order to explore the way in which the city becomes the site where compromises of identity take place. The case study will then focus upon the analysis of life experiences of Bangladeshi women in London.

Globalisation and the formation of the Nation-State<sup>1</sup> are both the starting points to explain this wide and fast movement called 'migration'. But in order to explain the changes that are taking place within societies and communities these days, I believe that it is necessary to expand the analysis by considering elements such as gender, development, urban cultures and transnationalism<sup>2</sup>. Today, migration isn't simply a physical movement, but it is also a voluntary research of new possibilities and better conditions of life (Sayad 2002).

Within this context, it is my aim to concentrate specifically on migrant women's experiences, by illustrating, analysing, and discussing the dynamics of negotiation and visibility within urban spaces.

Specific patterns of feminist literature have contributed substantially to individualise in the sexual division of society the main cause for women's<sup>3</sup> weak or absent position within society. Nevertheless, it is my intention here to keep in mind this consideration, but without creating a specific debate. Instead, the research moves from an identification of operative social dynamics that take place during migration, in order to create a fertile ground upon which to discuss practical ways in which women negotiate their identities. By doing this, I want to highlight the active role that women assume during the processes of resettlement and their capacity to negotiate tradition and culture in a new environment. This dissertation is a picture of women as subjects 'in-between', or in other words, in a state of continuous balance between what is old and what is new, imagination and reality, memories and everyday life (Sayad 2002; Simmel in Wolff 1950; Papastergiadis 2000).

Thus, in this context, imagination plays an important role within the constitution of 'in-between' spaces. I intend 'imagination' as the complex system of traditions, memories and hopes that give birth to the 'myth of return', as a concept which doesn't derive from inscribed culture and, just like identity, is always in transition.

My argument here is that imagination is actually one of the most influential elements to take into consideration when discussing migrant's space of self-recognition. It is through the reproduction of inscribed and known communitarian dynamics that the migrant begins to create a space of visibility. Thus, I believe that during migration, the dynamics of an identity's reconstruction shift from the private/domestic space into the public/urban location. This is the reason why I consider women so central when discussing urban migration. In this sense, London becomes a melting-pot of imagined communities. As well as a site of experience, the city can also be a projection of failed expectations. In this case, the woman migrant starts to dream

about Home, identified either with the family they left behind or with the country of origin (Crewe and Kothari 1998).

The dissertation comprises two macro-sections. The first part is divided as follows: Chapter 1 is a theoretical excursus through sociological theories regarding migration and the way in which the migrant, with particular attention to women, actually starts to negotiate their own identity. This process starts in the country of origin; it develops more deeply during the journey, and continues once arrived at destination in order to create a space of visibility within the host country.

Chapter 2 is a theoretical approach to the City as both a space of imagination and a site of physical visibility for migrant women. Particular attention is given, in the first part, to narratives regarding London and expectations, perceptions and feelings surrounding it; while in the second part, the City becomes physical, tangible, and, least but not last, a site of performance.

Chapter 3 highlights the case-study of the dissertation. After a brief, but fundamental trace of the Bangladeshi community's history in London I will introduce the field-work that I carried out within an association called Island Neighbourhood Project, currently one of the resources provided by the Council of Tower Hamlets in collaboration with the Methodist Church for Bangladeshi women.

The second part is a discussion about the methodology adopted for primary and secondary data collection, semi-structured interviews, and discussion group, and the analysis and discussion of the findings.

The purpose of this structure is to create a solid and selected theoretical background in order to gain the knowledge required to understand the analysis of the case-study.

The doubt that concerns me at this stage regards the discourse of exclusion, rather than integration. The risk that communities raise barriers of homogenisation in order to maintain their exclusivity is high. And this is precisely the aspect of London that I will discuss at the end of the research.

London is undoubtedly a perfect example of a "map" in which migrating identities trace their journey and co-exist within the same physical space. By identifying women as bridges of continuity between past and present, is fundamental to tracing their activity within it.

## CHAPTER ONE: MIGRATION AND GENDER – COMPLEX PATTERNS OF IDENTITY

*".....But even if I fragmented him and represented him in these splinters that is still not quite the point. He has his own story. It is there in his clothes, his language, his house, in the gestures he makes when indicating the best places to go to eat tajines, bstilla, couscous, sardines." (Chambers, 1994).*

*"In England I don't know who I am. I know my name and other things but I don't know what I am doing here. In my own language I could tell you many things about myself but I find it hard to speak in English." (Florian, Transparency Project, UK 2007).*

In this chapter, I want to illustrate the way in which migration, with its numerous variables, comes to influence identity, forcing the subject to constantly re-think and re-define him/her self. In order to do this, my analysis departs from sociological theories of migration; it develops through fundamental reflections upon identity and representation, and ends in an analysis of the dynamics of power in which women co-exist.

### 1.1 Migration: Definition of a Complex Phenomenon

The United Nations defines a migrant as "any person who lives temporarily or permanently in a country where he or she was not born, and has acquired some significant social ties to this country."<sup>4</sup> This definition doesn't consider, for instance, people that migrate within the same country or stay within it for more or less<sup>5</sup> than one year. In order to understand how complex it is today to define a migrant<sup>5</sup>, I believe that a good starting point is to "undo" the UN conventional definition of a migrant and understand what are the factors involved in the process.

It is possible to identify three main factors:

1. Country of origin
2. The migrant
3. Host country

Dynamics of power<sup>6</sup> influence the relation that one factor has with the others, thus creating an innumerable series of variables.

Only recently, sociologists and economists have formulated theories that could explain, in a systematic way, the causes and consequences of these relations. Considering a structural perspective, two main categories of variables were identified and discussed: the push and the pull factors (Hoffmann and Hans 1981). The push factors determine the reasons why the subject decides to leave the country of origin (i.e. difficulty in reaching personal goals or external events such as famines or wars); while the pull factors are the gold nuggets that attract the migrant in the new country (i.e. increased chances of employment or to gain a good education). The combination between these two factors becomes the research of something better, an "ideal life" (Guhathakurta et al. 2007, Anthias 2000 ).

Migration is "seen as a system in which the flow is driven by the originating pressures of market needs, the counter-responses of individual migrants, and the regulating valves of the state politics. ....Causation is identified in the binary terms of opportunity/prohibition, or surplus/deficit," (Papastergiadis, 2000:93). The metaphor of flow delineates the sense of journey. The journey becomes flexible because of globalisation, intended here as a rapid mobility of capital and information. The present moment is all about movement of people and capital and "even those who have never left their homeland are moved by this restless epoch," (Papastergiadis, 2000:2). Despite whether this process of 'incorporation' is voluntary or not, it is a matter of fact that different ethnic groups come to share the same physical space; cultures "contaminate" each other, and people are required to be more and more flexible in terms of adaptation. Sayad (2002) distinguishes identity's variables within two main groups: variables of origin (social characteristics that are inscribed within the migrant's identity) and variables of conclusion (elements that distinguish all migrants once arrived at destination). In order to find their own place within the host country, the migrant subject begins a process of re-discovering and negotiation of these variables. Both the aim and the result of this process isn't a slow adaptation to the host culture, instead it is an engagement with it.

#### How does this engagement actually take place?

The subject can be either an active or passive component during the process. In the first case, it is necessary to consider globalisation as a multiple congregation of dynamics. By doing this, Ong (2003) recognises that individuals build their identity following different paths. It is necessary to overcome the binary opposition between local and global and start to think instead in terms of a conscious negotiation. There must be a process of recognition of the variety of ethnic groups which populate a country in order to be able to localise specific grounds of action.

But migrants can also be the new element that makes each culture advance in knowledge. Park (1969) describes the migrant as someone that lives in two diverse social groups. The result of this division is the creation of an unstable character, called the marginal man. Park wrote: ".....it is in the mind of the marginal man that conflicting cultures meet and fuse. It is, therefore, in the mind of the marginal man that the process of civilisation is visibly going on, and it is in the mind of the marginal man that the process of civilisation may be studied," (1969:131). Though living between two cultures, no cultural assimilation is possible, because the subject keeps their own specific characteristic, but only a cultural enrichment. Migration makes the individual free from boundaries and the stranger becomes the one that liberates the host culture. The subject that Simmel (in Wolff 1950) refers to as the stranger is someone that moves into a place because he/she decides to stay. Although the migrant is fixed within a specific social group and his position is determined by the fact that he hasn't belonged to that group since the beginning, he brings qualities that are not specific to the new group itself. This makes him/her a vehicle of objectivity that helps the host culture to advance in knowledge. I must admit that I found both Park and Simmel's statements quite simplistic. I believe that both these authors failed to consider if and how the subject is altered in any way within this new position; if the 'stranger' is actually perceived as such by the host population, and if

so, does he/she perceive him/her self as a 'stranger' or other. The active role of the migrant is perceived only as a long-term positive effect for the host population. Though recognising that the stranger struggles in order to settle into the new environment, this aspect is highly overcome.

On the other hand, we come to meet a subject that is not in control of their own situation. Sayad (2002) delineates a human being, the migrant, who belongs to a disadvantaged social group. Migration authorises a new vision of the world and the position that the individual occupies within it. Nevertheless, the migrant remains passive and subject to the society's wish and organisation. What before was a dream about improving the quality of life, now becomes a condition of sickness and the migrant remains stuck in-between two worlds. In Chambers (1993) migration is a way of escaping from a reality that simply doesn't work anymore. The migrant is forced to deal with the fact that there are no fixed points in their journey, nor in their life. This state of in-between forces the subject to face their own boundaries and question their identity and language, but doesn't allow him/her space for action.

In whichever way the migrant is considered, it is clear that there are two main concepts that arise from this excursus: hybridity and deterritorialisation. Migration and its journey forces us, as researchers, to rethink binary concepts of time/space, global/local, rich/poor and consider instead "identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation." –

## **1.2 Migration and Gender: Which Identity for Women?**

Gender is a concept which tends to be mainly associated with "women" and their submissive role within social and family's dynamics (Behera, 2006). I believe that the way in which "gender" is used as a sociological concept can actually influence the overall analysis of the text. Therefore, I feel the necessity to state that I will refer to gender mainly as a relational concept, and the way in which these dynamics influence women's subjectivity (Indra 1999). It is necessary to avoid thinking about gender as a homogenisation of the category 'woman'; instead we must think of it as the way in which men and women intersect with the society.

There is an evident lack of literature about female migration (Bujis 1993, Indra 1999, Anthias 2000). According to Thapan (2006), Anthias and Lazaridis, (2000), the reason for it is because women aren't perceived as active factors during the migration process, but instead are seen as deeply connected to their husband or family will. Although, according to statistical data, migrant women are an estimated 95 million worldwide – half of all the migrant population – only recently there has been an increase of attention towards women migration dynamics (Bujis, 1993). Despite the fact that migration takes place because of cultural issues (for example marriage) or economic factors (for example as cheap labour), women are thereby forced to decide on the basis of "opportunities and constraints" (Thapan, 2006).

Since the analysis of women issues tended to depart from a precise location/ association of women into private/domestic sphere, this caused a strong limitation

within migration studies in relation to gender (Crewe and Kothary, 1998; Anthias, 2000). Given this, researchers and policy makers felt the necessity to relocate categories of action into two main groups: macro-structures and micro-structures (Castells and Miller, 2003; Wright, 1995). While macro-structures are identified for example with political economies, migration systems, and Nation-State policies; micro-structures are intended as informal networks that migrants develop themselves, such as personal relationships, associations for mutual help and family.

If we borrow from Stuart Hall (1997) the definition of cultural identity as not fixed, but always mutable, and from Thapan (2006:26) the idea that "it is in migration, a shift in place and culture, that the fluid and flexible nature of the construction of identity is most apparent", migrant women can also be located 'in-between' structures of patriarchy dominion and social change. It is within this theoretical frame, that the complexity of a woman's identity and subjectivity clearly emerges, showing a subject that, despite all the difficulties, is able to shape her own experience.

It is not a new concept that women are recognised as the official channel of cultural and traditional transmission within their communities. According to Bates (2000), migration tends to promote insecurity. Thus, women are fundamental in the building of a sense of security inside their community. The maintenance of traditional gender roles within the private sphere helps the community to find a sense of stability. Women are used as symbols of the Nation or the community and, though evident changes and adaptation are required by migration, women have the responsibility to maintain traditions and cultures (Gaitskell and Unterhalter 1989, Yuval- Davis 1997).

In any case, I disagree with the tendency to portray migrant women as passive subjects or victims of circumstances. Although I recognise the importance of taking into consideration the fact that the causal factors that push women to migrate may not be 'voluntary' (Anthias and Lazaridis 2000; Pryer 1992), I believe that migration offers different spaces of action which requires structural changes. Women can experience a decline or an improvement of their status during social migration. But at this stage it is fundamental not to mistake the lack of political representation— that women still suffer from, with the limitations that their community attributes to them. I believe that the migration experience gives to women the possibility to move in-between the public and the private sphere. This gives them access to experience different social paths (i.e. public space) that otherwise would have remained unknown.

Trinh Minh-Ha and her representation of Vietnamese women expresses well the capacity of women to break fixed schemes of power<sup>10</sup>— in order to re-discover and re-define their subjectivity. The Vietnamese director is very concerned about the issue regarding the expropriation of women's bodies and this is the reason why she uses her work to explore first of all herself and her experience. She found it difficult to define her identity, since she considers herself as 'in-between'.

“.....Sitting here, thinking about my mum, I can hardly believe the change she had been through since we moved here....by passing from one culture to another...” (Trinh Minh-Ha 1992:81). I found this affirmation particularly interesting because of

an evident consciousness that arises from it. According to Minh-Ha, language becomes a rule-breaker of the liminal space that society has created for women. Thus, they are recognised as active actors. Women are a hybrid of cultures and within this hybridity they are able to reaffirm their subjectivity through words. Actually, this capacity puts in place a process of “Do” and “Undoing” (Butler, 1993) of the Self which is extremely important for the affirmation of female subjectivity. Therefore, Trinh Minh-Ha highlights the importance of language as a way to express subjectivity. By doing this, she creates new spaces of representation in which identities are both flexible and complex at the same time.

I strongly believe that migration accentuates this capacity of women to 'stand out' from spaces and time, of 'separate development', that is the attempt of society to develop and reinforce women's erasure by limiting their association or confinement to the homeland.

Women are able to express themselves through words that are situated in a dimension of informality and personality. I deeply respect Minh-Ha's work since I've found it intensely significant and ground-breaking. She has been able to seize the exact point: in her view, through language, women can relate as active actors at the same moment to the Particular and the Universal.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE CITY – IMAGINATION AND VISIBILITY OF THE SELF

In this chapter, I want to build a theory of the city which reflects both ideas of imagination and representation. It is not easy to identify what a city is. It is not just about buildings and streets, but also about expectations, memories and experiences related to gender, ethnicity and race.

The exercise that I wish to practice here refers to the city as the place where subjects form and are formed, the site where subjectivity overcomes physical barriers and models its experience in order to create a space of visibility.

### 2.1 "Imagining Dreamland" – Narratives About a City

When I discussed Trin Minh-Ha's analysis of subjectivity, one main concept arose: that is that women express their subjectivity through language. This concept deeply affects a discourse about city imaginaries because it is through narratives that the city can be represented and, therefore, researched. The relationship that interests the subject and the city is quite complex since it is the cause and the result of innumerable possibilities of intersection between them.

Does the place that we live reflect the state of 'in-between' of the migrant?

According to Bridge and Watson (2003) and Appadurai (2001) the subject's experience is determined by narratives which give origin to a double process; on the one hand the individual shapes the city, and on the other the city shapes the individual. "There is no one narrative of a city, but many narratives construct cities in different ways highlighting some aspect and not others," ( Bridge and Watson 2003: 14). The city must be pliable in order to adapt itself to different needs. The city is a site of imaginary expectations but also a site of fear.

Appadurai (2001) discusses the fact that the individual is the victim of a specific discourse generated by the mass-media. The message that comes from this becomes a sort of desire that people need to fulfil— in order to make their lives better. To imagine something better has become an ordinary activity in everyday life; it sounds like the only compromise that allows people to survive and that pushes the individual to move from one place to another. Appadurai mentions this phenomenon as 'Diasporas of hope, Diasporas of terror and Diasporas of desperation'. Whatever this process may be called, imagination becomes a combination of memories and desires that helps the migrant to establish a practice of adaptation in the new place. We must not mistake 'imagination' and 'fantasy'. Whilst the first can generate an impulse towards action, the second can manifest itself with indifference since its nature is normally self-referential.

Given this, the city becomes the space<sup>12</sup>— where imagination manifests itself. It is through the reproduction of memories within the city that the migrant starts to weave a state of 'in-between'. According to Vidley (1992), this is the easiest way for an individual to identify themselves within a place. The city is also the place that "can provide stability and a sense of unproblematic identity," (Massey 1992).

How does imagination physically shape the city? I am about to analyse specific narratives regarding London in order to highlight the deep impact that this may have upon a migrant's experience of the city.

Pamela K. Gilbert in her "Imagined Londons" makes a strong statement when she says "...while there are an infinite number of Other Londons, there are no Londons other than those of imagination," (2002:1). What does she mean by this? First of all that London is a space that physically represents the individual's necessities; secondly, that narratives represent the way in which time dominates space. What I mean by this is that London is subjected to innumerable purposes and is a locus in which subjective experiences come together creating, though, a differentiated Other.

It seems that notions of complexity, fragmentation and difference actually mould a city that is 'flexible'. But if this is true, then why is there a general tendency within all the narratives that I have considered so far, to 'un-do' London in order to reaffirm a sense of belonging?

Woollacott (2002) brings the example of migrant Australian women who arrived in London between 1870 and 1940 to pursue an education and a career. Australian women's experience of/in London is a great example of re-articulation of national identity through imagination. Migration – intended as distance from homeland – gave them a legitimising to expand their access to the public sphere, and therefore movement into public places<sup>13</sup>. In order to map Australia onto London and establish their sense of belonging, these women's experience became a manifestation of complaints and criticisms towards London and its 'Britishness' (2002:86). By creating a negative vision of London, the result was to clearly articulate Australian national identity. As Woollacott points out, the first step for these women was to recognise the social and political progressive of Australia, in order to highlight what wasn't socially advantageous for Londoners. To quote some examples, Australian women used to point out that poverty in London was like nowhere else; that the British Government didn't have enough money to pay the soldiers that were fighting; that the English climate was very bad and not comparable to the Australian one. By citing this example, I want to highlight two main factors:

The first one concerns what I like to call "a process of un-doing". This is when the Self identifies itself in a space 'other'. This means, in other words, that the subject-migrant is actually an active principle within a flexible space. One cannot exist without the other. As Burgin (1996) points out, subject and space are deeply correlated; they are both manifestations and a manifesting of each other.

I disagree with Lefebvre's idea of space as an unplanned space (1991). According to the French sociologist, the space is simply the result of past actions, as a locus where everything is just reproduced and represented. Actually, it is my opinion that Lefebvre fails to consider notions of experience and memory as elements in constant re-production, since they are deeply constituted by time. Time is an element that seems not to leave any sign within Lefebvre's considerations. Or, even better, time exists just as a 'past time'. The present is forged as a result of relations between

actions that already existed. Lefebvre says also that nothing is imagined or ideal, but it is the space itself that permits the raising of new ideas and prohibits other ideas to return (1991:73). The subject doesn't have space for action and is simply occupying a territory that nobody planned. It is my opinion that to imagine the city means actually to engage with it, by finding a compromise.

The second factor is represented by the common tendency to recall notions of nationalism when discussing the re-affirmation of the Self (Wollacott 2002, Chatterjee 2000, Young 2000). In Woollacott's research this is very clear: it is because of their being Australian, that those women are entitled to think of London as a negative place. Nationalism is expressed through language and cultural identity; it represents a way of gaining self-representation in a new environment; it is the manifestation of the desire to distinguish the self from the other. And while staying in a foreign Country, migrants recall memories of their own roots, by reproducing smells and visions of it as a source of identity (Urry 2003). To cite Bridge and Watson "Not only are cities constituted in imagination and different forms of representation, they are also themselves sites of imagination and creativity." (2003: 17).

## **2.2 The Public Space and Notions of Performativity**

Up till now, I have tried to construct a theoretical network that could explain which factors take part and influence a migrant during the process of settlement in a new country. At this stage, it becomes fundamental to individualise and analyse where identity, negotiation and imagination do come together in order to begin the process of re-definition of the Self. My answer is the public space. If I think of London's public space, I can see a constant penetration between global and local which gives birth to a texture of local networks that creates differentiation; I can see a realm where cultures displace symbols in order to be recognised.

The city is the space where "...imagined communities of modernity are being reshaped at the macropolitical (global) and micropolitical (cultural) levels of everyday existence," (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996:6). To be 'reshaped' doesn't mean necessarily to "lose connotation of originality". Actually, I believe that it is instead the encounter between these two elements to generate which I consider to be one of the problems of the present society: a spasmodic imposition of common values. London is a great example of the way in which globalisation has instead generated an accentuation of locality and relativism. The constant attempt of the media and the Nation-State to create uniformity of value has generated only a personal and collective frustration and disagreement. The city is the space where the right to be recognised finds expression. Therefore, the public realm isn't a straightforward experience, but instead a rollercoaster of different messages (Zukim as cited in Keith and Pile 1993). It is necessary to recognise that a city is a map of pluralism of identities in order to improve logic of differences. According to Young (1990, 2000), the contemporary public space fails to accept a plurality of languages through which diverse expressions can be manifest. It is because of a lack of language able to guarantee respect, knowledge and agreement that it is difficult for each ethnic group not only to find its own role within the community, but to be actually recognised for it.

It is not possible, affirm Young, to have common values and a language as a site of recognition, while trying to preserve a notion of an individual's identity. This is the reason why she creates the notion of an ideal 'city life' (1990: 237), a public space where a huge network of different activities and experiences take place and a "social differentiation without exclusion" is possible (1990 :238). Of course, this is a utopian concept, but I have used it in order to prove the fact that the public space is also a site of resistance ( Back 1996). It is my opinion that 'resistance' is the concept that guides the cultivation and representation of specific identities and this is precisely the space that the migrant comes to occupy and negotiate.

Resistance and negotiation are two concepts that shaped Western women's experience of the public realm, which was used to break rigid segregation rules during the nineteenth century. The city became the site where women could overcome their status as mothers and wives and gain a political visibility ( Radcliffe 1993). Through manifestations, those women were able to shape "new forms and discourses of female political identity" (Radcliffe 1993:104). The Invisible Flaneur (Wilson 1992) wasn't invisible anymore: the experience of women and their engagement with the public sphere gave birth to a revolutionary negotiation over gender-specific demands. By entering a male gaze, women broke the boundaries between private and public spheres, putting in evidence the necessity to redefine the boundaries of belonging.

On the other hand, according to Sennett (1977) the city is the site where people are forced to find new ways to come into contact with the 'other'. This process of discovering and recognition is a product of the constant state of confusion in which the city finds itself because of a lack of boundaries between private and public. Sennett relates geography to a sense of community, affirming that people start to share a spatial place when it is common to use the pronoun "we", which contains "shared beliefs and values" (Sennett 1998:137). "We" becomes a symbol of a particular space, community and identity that are possible to share, overcoming fixed social and racial categories (Sennett 1992).

Thus, it is by performing<sup>14</sup> within the public space that people discover and understand differences, reproduce memories and share experiences. The city becomes the way in which it is possible to neutralise the indifference between different social groups, but is also the place where those groups feel the necessity to re-shape their identity in order to create defined cultural specifications.

## CHAPTER THREE: BANGLADESHI COMMUNITY SETTLEMENT IN THE UK

The aim of this chapter is to illustrate the history of Bangladeshi settlement in the UK and the role of women within this process. Through the historical approach offered by Gardner (2002), Eade et al (2002) and Asghar (1996), it is necessary to create the background useful to proceed with the following analysis and discussion of the data collected.

### 3.1 Banglatown and London – The Struggle for Cultural Identity

Between the 1950s and 1960s many Bangladeshis migrated to London in search of employment. When East Pakistan became the Independent Republic of Bangladesh in 1971, male Bengalese especially decided to move to London in order to acquire stability and professional achievement. Most of them settled in East London, all around Tower Hamlets and the Docklands, turning Spitalfields into the heart of so-called "Banglatown". As Eade et al (2002) points out, the Bangladeshi community felt the necessity to create a "new place identity" (2002:162) which involved entrepreneurs, political and community activists shaping the new Bengalese identity in London.

The 2001 Census reported just about 300,000 Bangladeshi residents in the UK (0.5 per cent of the UK population)<sup>15</sup>, who were anyway intending to stay for a limited amount of time and then return to Bangladesh after having saved enough money to live with back home. The impossibility to do this transformed a temporary solution into a stable settlement (Kershen 2000). For this reason, efforts were made to bring wives and families to London. This situation allowed Bangladeshis to be ".....the last of the groups from the Indian subcontinent to complete their family reunification" (Ahmed 2005: 102). So, it all ended up with the Bengalese contributing to a renewed wave of migration that has been going on for almost forty years.

Life in London has never been easy for the South Asian community. The decision to establish their community in the most deprived part of London, made their experience in the city more difficult, but also more intense. Bangladeshi people were often offered low-paid and unskilled jobs and as the textile industry started to decline, new restaurant businesses started to thrive. The initiative was so successful that more than 50 restaurants are today reported in Brick Lane alone. It is my opinion that food allowed Bengalese traditions and culture to be known and maintained within London. Being a Bangladeshi in London created an "in-between" space that provided the terrain for elaborating strategies of and new signs of identity.

Actually, the attempt to re-establish a sense of community in London was quite successful. Bengalese politics and activists thought that emphasising an idea of belonging through the concept of nationalism, could give to the community a better chance to become visible. In 1998 the Bengali New Year was introduced to Tower Hamlets and attention was given to the fact it that wasn't confined to a particular area of London, but was instead a "truly national event linking Bangladeshis in their Country of origin with the Bangladeshi diaspora" ( Eade et al. 2002:165). Traditional

food, clothes, music such as baul (traditional folk music) and classical, were finally visible to everybody in London and became a strong symbol of the Bangladeshi community in London. The Mela festival wasn't just addressed to Bengalese people, but also to other communities. The festival brought together "Hindus and Muslims in the Bengal region, while non-Bangladeshis in London could enjoy a multicultural day out. London's image as a cosmopolitan, global city was enhanced through an event that celebrated both multicultural harmony and the distinctive cultural tradition of a particular ethnic minority" (Eade et al. 2002:166).

I feel it necessary to mention the racist activities that affected Bangladeshi people during the 1970s. As reported, some provocative National Front marches in Brick Lane ended in violence. In 1978 Altab Ali, a local Bangladeshi garment worker, was stabbed to death and this gave to young Bangladeshis the opportunity to organise themselves politically into the Young Muslim Organization (YMO) to re-establish the religious leading role—.

### **3.2 Bangladeshi Women in London – Experience of Self-Definition**

As mentioned above, Bangladeshi women migrate to London mainly because of family reunification issues (Ahmed 2005, Gardner 2002). Ahmed (2005) traces a powerful portrait of those women's experience affirming that "female migrants play a distinctive role within trans-national communities" (2005: 100). Migration changes their position within the family and the community, but reinforces also their role as cultural transmitters. As explained in-depth in Chapter 1, migrant women find themselves in the position of re-evaluating their perception of self and recreating social roles. For women living in Bangladesh, female duties are very clear and historically defined; these centre on taking care of the family and the home. Bangladeshi women experienced also a strong sense of isolation once they arrived in London, and in order to maintain a 'known' order most of the women attempted to maintain the roles that they had back in Bangladesh (Ahmed 2005). New activities such as shopping or taking children to school gave to Bengalese women the possibility to find a compromise with the lifestyle in the UK, but at the same time allowed them to enlarge their visibility within the London community. This shift of responsibility contributed the fundamentals of the construction of a new identity. The faith promoted by the imam in Tower Hamlets became essential in order to maintain two aspects of Bengalese community (Eade et al 2002). The first one regarded the continuity of cultural traditions (the way in which women and men had to share and live in the public space, the use of the veil and so on), while the second was sharpening the essential character of a Bangladeshi woman and her being a Muslim. Women who identified themselves as Muslim agreed on the fact that it was the principal aspect of their identity (Ahmed 2005:122). In order to understand this concept better, I would like to report a particular incident that occurred three years ago.

In 2004 a book called "Brick Lane" was published, written by a young novelist called Monica Ali. As previously said, Brick Lane is a well-known street right in the heart of Inner London. It is a pedestrian area surrounded by Bangladeshi restaurants, sari

shops and off-licences owned mainly by Bengali people. The book quoted above is the story of Nazeen, a Bangladeshi woman, forced to leave her family in order to get married and live in Tower Hamlets (East London) with an older man named Chanu. Chanu is a Londoner of Bengali origin. The lack of spoken English and the strong Bengali roots, force Nazeen to stay at home and "accomplish" to her traditional duties. It is the story of a woman that struggles to find herself within the process of maintaining and performing her traditions in a foreign country. Because of this book and its subsequent movie adaptation, the Bangladeshi community leaders from The Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council – which represents Bangladeshis in the UK – formed numerous arguments condemning the book as a "despicable insult"<sup>17</sup>— . The movie also caught the Bengalese women's attention. The comment that I consider being the most interesting was written by a Bangladeshi woman. The comment says:

"I have read the book. I plan to boycott the film. This is because the portrayal of my (I am Bangladeshi) women as whores. I don't think Monika Ali knows what it is like to be a Bangladeshi woman, after all, she is half white and grew up in England. I am just disappointed that we work so hard to bring up our reputation and she slams it like that. My women are empowered and I can't relate to this story in any way because of the different experience I have, of my mum, and other women in my community." —<sup>18</sup>

I consider this comment really significant. It is possible to trace within it four main sociological concepts that I will be investigating in more depth in the following chapters. What comes to my attention is first of all a strong idea of identity ("I don't think Monika Ali knows what it is like to be a Bangladeshi woman"), a personal consideration towards community representation ("I am just disappointed that we work so hard to bring up our reputation"), a sense of belonging ("My women are empowered and I can't relate to this story in any way because of the different experience I have, of my mum, and other women in my community") and of difference/exclusion ("she is half white and grew up in England").

Of course, I am aware that this example doesn't reflect the opinion and experience of all Bangladeshi women, but I consider it a provocative starting point to analyse in-depth my field work within a community of Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets, London.

## CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, my aims are:

- To address the questions that I took into consideration before, during and after the field-work, and
- To define the methodological approach used during the interviews

### 4.1 Which questions?

The idea that drives this entire dissertation is that London must be considered as a map of identities. Such a map is the result of variegated experiences, commonalities and differences that may bring different ethnic communities to share the same place, whilst still excluding each other. Actually, this exclusion can be the consequence of actions intended to fight the general tendency to assimilation, instead of integration.

Given this, it is my opinion that the whole set of an individual's experiences, as well as expectations, desires and dreams represent the other factor, which entraps the individual-migrant in a state of "in-between", forcing him/her to find their own visibility within a multicultural city such as London. While trying to find a compromise between the past and the present, the city becomes an imaginary space where the individual performs within the public and the private spheres of his/her life.

Until now, I have proved, through a wide range of sociological and anthropological literature review and analysis, how women are particularly subjected to this process of re-definition because of their given role within the family as well as cultural normative.

In order to collect data that could help me gain a first-hand experience of this process, first of all, I had to define the object of my research. It emerged to be migrant women and their experience of London, as well as the individuation of a potential self-negotiation within the urban environment and the research of elements that could somehow influence this whole process. Therefore, I decided to hold a set of interviews with a group of migrant women to allow myself to respond to the research issues. (I will explain in more detail which methodology I used to conduct the interviews and how I recruited the participants in the following section of this chapter).

In particular, I have addressed the following questions:

- How does the subject perceive her role within her own community?<sup>19</sup>—
- Which discourse or 'linguistic performance' (Wengraf, 2001:7) does the subject use in order to define her role?
- What are the principles of such discourse?
- What are the limits or the merits of the discourse?
- How does the participant use such discourse to negotiate her visibility?
- Which kind of practice does this negotiation find within London?

I want to stress that the same questions used to plan the interviews, are the same questions that I used to carry out the analysis of the data collected. This is because I wanted to make sure that there was continuity and coherence between the phase of planning and the one of post-production.

## 4.2 Which methodology?

In May 2008, I got in touch with an association in Tower Hamlets called INP – Island Neighbourhood Project. This association, founded in 1980 and formally supported by the Methodist Church of Tower Hamlets, has the main purpose of locating and working with those who are most in need by offering access to services otherwise unreachable because of a lack of opportunities. One of the projects the INP promotes is the creation of specific learning and recreational opportunities for Bangladeshi women.

I had an initial meeting with the Director and the Development Worker (a woman of Bengali origin) of the charity in order to explain the purposes and methodology of the research. I told them about my intention to hold interviews with a specified number of Bengali women and asked permission to be introduced to them.

The decision of approaching and recruiting the participants gradually was dictated by previous experiences of engagement with communities for academic purposes. It is my belief and my experience that this way of proceeding can facilitate even a partial knowledge between researcher and participant. This knowledge is helpful to create the premises of mutual respect and collaboration<sup>20</sup>.

After being introduced by the Development Worker, I started to attend learning classes in order for those women to get used to my presence and become familiar with my research purpose. After this period of observation<sup>21</sup>, I was finally able to arrange a first interview with three Bengali women, who voluntarily decided to take part in the research<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, I identified straight away some limitations to my research.

First of all, the participants were recruited directly by the Development Worker<sup>23</sup>. Because we presumed (and state) her deeper relationship with those women, this way of proceeding on the one hand gave me the possibility to abbreviate the recruitment timing and increased the opportunities to interview the women committed to being part of the research. On the other hand, though, it took away from me numerous possibilities to estimate any kind of first reaction and comments to my research, which would have probably helped me to feel those women's interest, understanding and perception towards the research and to choose the participants overcoming criteria of gender and race. In fact, the participants selected were Bengali, English speakers and literate. In my opinion, these characteristics are connotations of a specific way of proceeding for the Development Worker. It is my opinion that by following these criteria, she was actually trying to provide so-called 'key informants' (Bernard 2002:187), people who are conscious about their own cultural rules and thus are able to guide the researcher through them. In the end, the

participants and I finally agreed on holding two interviews of one hour each. Because of family issues (such as summer school vacations for example), they told me that they were unable to attend more than two interviews. I cannot deny the fact that this limited amount of time represented a big challenge because it meant the necessity to address questions that could help me to maximise the quality of the data collected in a really short amount of time. But on the other hand, it meant also the risk that choosing semi-structured interviews could not give me the kind of information I needed. I realised that actually this kind of demand was already precious information for my research. I will explain later in more detail what I mean by this.

A first interview was held with the three participants together. The decision to do so was dictated by the idea of stimulating both a comparison of experiences and an exchange of ideas between them. Thus, I was able to collect an impressive amount of data and an interesting picture of how the Bengali community is actually structured in Tower Hamlets.

A second interview was held exactly one week later. One participant didn't turn up, the second one resigned and the third one (the one from Dhaka), agreed on proceeding as agreed. Again, I decided to consider this situation as data to be analysed.

### **4.3 Participation and Semi-Structured Interviews**

At the beginning, I assumed that biographic-narrative interview (Wengraf, 2001) was the most useful methodology for me. Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful if there are chances to obtain not more than one interview with the participant (Bernard 2002:205). The reason why I preferred this kind of qualitative methodological research rather than another is the fact that questions are generally open-ended. Since my aim was to understand the subjectivity and its process of negotiation with the surrounding environment, I decided to structure the interviews in such a way that they could feel free to talk about themselves without the rigid structure offered instead by other kinds of interview methodology. On the other hand, I tried as much as I could not to influence the participants directly, although I am aware that the choice of the questions is already an indirect way of influencing the research. As Bernard (ibid.) points out, semi-structured interviews allow the research to approach people 'who are accustomed to efficient use of their time'.

Nevertheless, semi-structured interviews also present some questionable aspects that it is necessary to take into consideration during the data analysis. The first element which I am referring to is the risk that the question doesn't get answered. Because of the wide range of information that the participant can give at an open-ended question, the risk is that the subject gives more attention to certain details rather than others, creating thus a sense of vagueness. Another element is that with semi-structured interviews, the subject can decide, voluntarily or not, which representational categories to use during the interview.

Given this, it is my opinion that if I assume that all speaking is bounded to its context (Squire, 2000), then all these variables can be part of the data analysis, creating in this way a fundamental and powerful image of subjectivity rather than truth itself.

Being interested in researching points of view, as I am, means also to investigate which culturally available resources the informant uses to construct his/her story (Miller and Glassner, 1997). I began this research with the idea of interacting with the participants, rather than using them merely as a data source, in order to produce a conversation which was mainly collaborative (Rapley, 2004) and I found semi-structured interviews the ideal solution.

I tried to do my best to encourage the informants to produce elaborate and detailed answers, in order to offer me their personal narration and their point of view.

The methodology that I used is just one of the several other ways in which a researcher can produce data. But, I strongly support and encourage, as Rapley (2004) does too, the importance of the researcher's experience and intuition during the interview and the analysis phase. Someone could find this way of proceeding questionable in terms of a systematic approach, but it is, in my opinion, one of the most effective ways to pursue subjectivity, rather than objectivity.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

As stated in the previous chapter, I held two interviews with three women. Those women are aged over 18, all born in Bangladesh and spoke Bengali, were Muslim, married, had children and were part of the INP charity. To make the distinction more clearly to the reader, I will refer to the women as follows: 1 and 2 to represent the women originally from the villages and 3 to represent the woman from Dhaka, the capital.

Because of the unexpected dynamics that the interviews took<sup>24</sup>, I had only one opportunity to talk with 1, 2 and 3 together. During the second interview, I had the pleasure to speak with just 3 who turned up for it as agreed.

By listening retrospectively to the voice recording, it was immediately apparent to me that the differences in quality of data collected during the first and the second interview differed too greatly to be analysed together. Thus, I decided to adopt common parameters of analysis but no comparison between the two interviews. In this way, I had to treat the two meetings as separate experiences, but at the same time I kept a coherence of analysis methodology during both.

I tried to highlight the commonalities and differences in terms of

- a) Subject
- b) Cultural practice
- c) London

What follows are the results of my field experience.

### 5.1 First Interview

#### A) The Subject

The first thing that appears to be clear in the speech of 1, 2 and 3 is that all of them came to London because a member of their family, a male, decided so.

- 1: *“My father came here for some studies... my father then got married in Bangladesh and he decided to set us up here.”*
2. *“My husband brought me here.”*
3. *“My granddad came to visit an uncle... he came somehow to meet my husband's family... and that's it... somehow they arranged everything... me to come here... and before I could say anything he passed away... But I had to keep my promise.”*

In terms of the subject of the discourse, 1 and 2 are both 'invisible and passive' in the sense that almost everything that they say to me is related to their husband or family, while it is different for 3, who concentrated the discourse upon an 'I' subject.

All the three of them are daily in touch with their family of origin in Bangladesh, but here in London their family is their husband's family.

1. *"My husband's cousins are in London."*
2. *"No, my family lives in America. My husband's family is here."*
3. *"My family is in Bangladesh. My dad's sister and my husband's dad are here. My mum and dad, brothers and sisters are at home."*

I found these similarities really interesting, because they actually are intended as a common Bengali practice. As Ahmed (2005) also reports, it is frequent for Bengali families who live abroad to send their sons back to Bangladesh in order to get married. This is because it is believed that girls in Bangladesh are well educated to be good wives and housekeepers rather than the ones born and raised in Britain. This way of thinking represents already a great example of cultural discourse. Their journey to London begins with a no-choice and the acceptance of it.

## B) Cultural Practices

Halfway through the interview 1, 2 and 3 clearly state, spontaneously, that there are some differences between them that cannot be ignored. It is evident that women in the villages have different obligations or limitations with respect to women in the city.

1. *"Back home the differences between the City and the Countryside are so different. They (pointing to 3) can decide what to do with their future... we have to accept it."*
3. *"The situation is changing though. Now they (pointing to 1 and 2) can access education. OK, you must stay home, do the cooking, stay behind your parents and everything... but now especially women I'm talking about can go to school."*

1, 2 and 3 are all educated. But their education is limited by the fact that their first obligation is to ensure that the family is taken care of, and then they can start to think about proceeding with their education. Once more, it appears as though the family is the main obstacle to this.

1. *"When I got married, I told my husband I wanted to continue my studies. At that time, we just got married, he told me that there was no time, I had to take care of my family. It is ten years now that I haven't studied. My husband now told me "OK, if now you want to go, you can go. But ten years is a lot of time... and now I'm suffering to get a job... I don't have experience, I'm not educated."*
3. *"I'd love to continue my studies."*

The negotiation begins. Education is recognised as a way of gaining experience or any other skill to achieve a state of wellbeing. This factor will be more deeply analysed and emphasised during the interview with 3, who found in knowledge the only way to escape illness and achieve freedom for her. But they all agree that their being part of a particular social structure which relates mostly on women's adaptability and sense of responsibility, represents a strong element of personal limitation.

### C) London

When asking them "How did you imagine London before arriving?" I had very diverse answers. While 1 was told about London as a dreamland, 2 and 3 had a really limited source of information. The curious thing about the three answers is that while 1 and 2 concentrated their discourse on what was immediately visible for them, 3 goes beyond this and tries to define London in terms of personal values.

1. *"I was told that London was really clean, that every house had a swimming pool. When I arrived here, my father had a one bedroom flat and I was keep looking for the swimming pool. Anyway, we don't know anything about London in Bangladesh. Here is completely different from us... in a better way. If you need help, they [the Police in Britain] will come to help you, it is clean and big."*
2. *"I like London. The environment is good, there are big stores and swimming pools."*
3. *"It doesn't matter for me if you have big TV or other stuff... it doesn't attract me. If I don't have freedom, I don't have anything".*

London represents also a changing of status or mansions within their own home. It is common to have servants in Bangladesh that do almost everything: housework, food shopping, and child care. In particular, 1 and 2 stress their unhappiness towards this change. They both use to have servants back home and they point out that coming to London meant them doing things that they weren't used to doing at home, such as housework. On the other hand, they achieved freedom, for example, walking alone on the streets.

1. *"Here I feel safe. That is the thing. In Bangladesh you need someone that comes with you, but here sometimes I go alone."*
2. *"For me is the same."*

To talk about London, becomes an excuse to point out what is wrong with Bangladesh. Bangladesh is corrupted, is unsafe<sup>25</sup>.

1. *"I went for seven months in Bangladesh. I was crying to come back. I didn't want to stay there."*
2. *"I love Bangladesh...I'm not saying that I don't like it...but everything is good and nice."*

1 and 2 agree on the fact that in London it is possible to achieve a lot of things in terms of materialities. 3 talks about London as a lack of possibilities, lack of freedom and the impossibility of achieving personal goals. Within 3's perspective, London represents a ground for struggle, and the necessity to find a way to gain freedom (this point will be clearer in the second interview). Anyway, for the three of them, London is a ground for negotiation which begins in the private/family sphere rather than the public. In my opinion, it is a great response to Papastergiadis' affirmation that for 'migrants having left home, there is no possibility of sameless return,' (2000:74).

## 5.2 Second Interview

The second interview I had just with 3 and is undoubtedly an 'intimate' conversation about her life, her feeling and her state of 'in-betweenness'. 1 didn't attend due to family commitments, while 2 let me know that she had told me everything during the previous session<sup>26</sup>. As previously mentioned, 3 comes from Dakka. It would appear that in the capital, women have a more 'privileged' position than the ones in the villages.

### A) The Subject

3's narration about herself is initially full of clear statements about her which denote a strong sense of repression of the individuality.

*"I must say, as first thing, that I really didn't want to come to London."*

*"I come from the Capital... my point is that we are a Developing Country, but I don't like it here. My mum can be a doctor, but here I'm nothing."*

Her discourse is all about the concept of 'negotiation'. She has to negotiate with:

- Her own family
- Her husband's family
- London, as a new environment

In the first case, her negotiation takes place when she says that, although she has been suffering a sense of loneliness and neglect with her in-laws, she doesn't say anything to her parents in Bangladesh, because they would worry about her. She puts herself in a stronger position by protecting the people that she loves.

*"I would like to bring my dad to London. Dad wants to see the world. He has been working a lot, when we were little... he spent all these year's giving us time...[...] I call my parents every day, they send me pictures, I send them pictures and I go every two years. But the last time I went was four years ago."*

With her family in London, the relationship that emerges is really interesting, especially with her mother-in law. Her husband's family comes from a village in Bangladesh. Her father-in-law wasn't able to read and write ("He used to sign with his finger-print.") while her mother-in-law at the beginning represents a clear obstacle for her. But afterwards, she realised there was a sense of solidarity with the elderly woman, developing towards her a sense of protection and deep respect.

Being a Bengali woman in London accentuates what I like to call the 'I' discourse. Conversely from 1 and 2, who used their husbands as a reference of the discourse, 3 is much more concerned and aware of her individuality: *"I have my responsibilities, but still I do something for myself."*

As soon as she arrived in London, she started to become depressed<sup>27</sup> and the doctor is the one that helps her to see what is wrong: *"I didn't know how to fit in this place. One day I went out to my doctor and he was saying "if you make friends, you'll feel better...[...] So I went anyway to college because I was feeling more depressed."*

*He [the doctor] gave me more tablets for my depression, but I went to college although my family here didn't like it."*

This illness is caused by a continuous state of misunderstanding with her husband's family, as well as the rigid and different cultural rules imposed on her by her marriage. Illness caused 3 to start to be aware of herself and to begin a negotiation that would bring her to a new visibility. One day she discovered the library facilities and she found in knowledge the key to her freedom as well as the creation of her own space: *"Basically, everything is different now. To be honest at the beginning I spent tough time trying to understand my in-laws... they didn't understand my language and I didn't understand theirs... sometimes I cannot control myself. I need space for myself so when I read, I'm happy, so even though it is 12 in the morning, I still I want to read and this makes me feel better... so it doesn't really affect me or my family if I spend time outside reading."*

The negotiation that takes part is evident. The time that is free from family and housekeeping obligations, is used to advance in knowledge. 3 says that she watches TV low in the night so that she doesn't wake anybody up. She goes out in the morning early to read so that she can be back around 7 to prepare breakfast for the family. These are the terms in which she describes her 'fight for freedom'. While negotiation appears to be her only choice, imagination becomes the incentive to create a new visibility within her cultural and social range: *"I did level 1, 2 and 3. I did really hard work to have good results and show them that I can do it."*

## B) Cultural Practices

Cultural dynamics represent big obstacles for the achievement of 'freedom'. It appears that Bengali social and family structures are keen to protect their traditions. As well as marrying someone of the same culture, family dynamics seem to have entrapped 3. Here some examples: *"Her daughters [she is referring to her in-laws daughter] don't have connections with their parents. She says 'hello' sometimes, comes to visit but still is different... I'm their daughter now... I always take my mother-in-law to the doctor because she [the daughter] doesn't want to..."*

Then she tells me about when her father-in-law got married for the second time: *"...for eight months, because mother was really upset that he got married again they didn't live together. So what happened, I told mum to stay in my room and father-in-law in the other room. So I had to look after them separately. Like children. That was hard work. They weren't talking and seeing each other."*

It is at this moment that 3 starts to see in her mother-in-law a woman that needs to be protected from her own cultural limitations. I found this part of the conversation not only really interesting from a researcher point of view, but also really touching.

Because her father-in-law "didn't go to school, he signs with his finger print. So that is why these (cultural) barriers make them stop in one place. He says women have to clean... if he says something is because he heard it from someone else", a deep sense of solidarity and comprehension emerges within 3 and her mother-in-law. She realises that her own solution, knowledge, can be also her mother's solution: *"Now*

*she is reading almost everything, she reads and she writes. So she realised that I gave her something more to think about... I made her understand that we need to do things and we are together. I made her to feel better, she found the security that she wanted, I gave it to her. If I'm free, she'll be free."*

It is clear within various episodes that 3 tells me about during the interview, that the relation of mutual collaboration between the two ladies, actually overcomes social restrictions and fixed gender rules in order to create a new space gained through negotiation.

### C) London

London represents both prison and freedom. When I asked 3 what she liked and disliked about London, she told me: *"One thing that I really like about this Country is that I feel secure. Doesn't matter what happens in the home environment, but as a Country you feel safe. Doesn't matter what happens, if you call the police, they can take action"*

But on the other hand: *"In this Country is more about laws, I don't like it. Because they [women in London] can get some benefits, they become lazy, so they can stay at home doing nothing. They got more chances for education. But they sit down watching TV not doing anything."*

London represents the space to feel secure and where to find new opportunities to advance. Migration is the struggle to make unheard voices heard, as well as "understanding myself". While talking about London, 3 told me about her dreams and hopes: *"One day I'm going to do something for women, I'm going to do it for the back generation. Mums need to be educated. They need to know what is good and what is bad in order also to make their child a good man or a good person. I would love to go back home to do some project with women, especially in the village... I've changed a lot since I arrived 13 years ago. I can say, where I am now I feel more proud, I've got that little brain, and I can use it. I think that I'm doing good. It's like fighting, but I don't think like that. Fighting can be done in different ways, I want to construct."*

London becomes for her the space of imagination, of dreams, future projects and acknowledgements, as well as the possibility to teach something out of her experience as a migrant and as a woman. The possibility to go back home, one day, is dictated by the desire for transmitting the knowledge and experience gained in London.

At the end of the interview, 3 talks again about her family in Bangladesh and about her desire of them moving here. Why? *"I'm going to feel freer if they'll be here. I will be free to go back"*.

This statement, actually, represents an imaginary 'happy end' to her struggle. By having everybody here in London, she will not only feel free to fly to Bangladesh and work there, but also to come back to London where all her family and her life are settled.



## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Whilst writing this dissertation, I began to realise that, rather than arriving at a possible solution, this research was actually shaping up as a starting point for new research. Although allowing myself almost six months in order to get to know the women that I was going to interview and their environment, I always had to consider the issue of me being a non-Bengali speaker, which made me constantly an 'outsider'. Whilst researching the Bengali women in London, I came across Gardner (2002) and her experience with elderly women in Tower Hamlets. Reading her results surprised me a great deal. Despite the fact that our research differentiated in target (elderly people/women) and in focus point (body/negotiation and urban space), I found that our experiences were tremendously similar. Those women and my participants were part of the same ethnic group in Tower Hamlets. As women they all experienced a sense of loss, 'in-between', change, confusion and struggle. And as researchers, we both had the feeling that there would always be a gap between us and them. Of course, from one point of view this can help the researcher to maintain as much objectivity as possible, but from another the situation is perceived as precarious, and the risk to overcome tacit rules- such as intimate questions- is high.

I also realised, as a researcher that not every situation depends on me. The possibility to hold interviews with my participants was strictly limited by family commitments and child care. But these situations actually confirmed the results of my research. What a researcher can do, is to try to derive the best from the situations that he or she is able to create and be absolutely confident about his/her feelings, opinions and impressions. Despite this, I feel that I have succeeded in satisfying the main object of my investigation: the dynamics of visibility and urban space. When discussing issues of subjectivity, it is difficult to generalise, but I believe that it is possible anyway to trace a general line of what has been said until now.

Despite the fact that migration can be either a voluntary or involuntary decision, it can either restrict the migrant's capacity of movement and visibility, raising thus a sense of frustration and illness, or actually incentivise the subject to elaborate once more their own self, 'forcing' her to react. In this way, a ground for action starts to take shape, transforming an experience of pure passivity into paths of activity. In both cases, imagination (intended here as a set of memories as well as expectations) plays a fundamental part in the creation of the so-called state of 'in-between'. Often that sense of entrapment and dissatisfaction arises mainly because of two elements: what the subject has to do and what she wants to do.

The research highlighted an internal division within their own social groups. Especially during my second interview, I realised that the most evident separations in terms of culture were between the woman from Bangladesh and her sister-in-law, who had Bengali origins but was raised in London. Their responsibilities and feelings toward their own families are completely different and my participant's discourse is mainly based on two pronouns: Us and Them. I observed how easily I could have taken these two terms for granted by considering 'Them' as referring to people of another culture, as Londoners for instance. In that case, I would have mistaken. The

explanation that came to my mind is that this division could be so apparent because the Bengali structure is quite close, so that the first woman comes to relate herself mainly with her family here, rather than other women. In this way, her only terms of confrontation are women from her daily environment. Besides, within Bengali culture, family is the first unit that a woman must refer to.

Nowadays, especially because of cultural demands, Bengali women can be easily pushed to take decisions that don't meet their personal aspirations. It is only then that London can become either the right chance to challenge one's cultural and social structure (as in the case of one of my informants) or simply reproduce the secular limitations of it. All my informants agreed on the fact that, for instance, here in London they are finally able to access the public space in a way that wasn't possible in Bangladesh. London is mainly associated with cleanliness, safety and physical freedom. Personal restrictions are imposed mainly by their own family and their Bengali social structure, not by the fact that they are living in London.

The urban space seems to be challenged mainly by traditional demands, not by issues regarding multiculturalism, for example. It looks as though the face of the Bangladeshi community in London is changing. Women are getting more involved in decision making and their identity is also trying to find a way to adapt to such a new and different environment as London. Even though the possibilities of fulfilling their own expectations are different in Bangladesh, the urban space allows an overcoming of those limits. And it is my opinion that it is through imagination that this process takes place.

I strongly believe that this consideration could be an excellent starting point to research and analyse further migrant communities in London.

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## **APPENDIX: EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF THE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

### **Q: "How did you come to London?"**

1. "I came with my family... my husband."
2. "Came with my husband."
3. "I came alone."

### **Q: "How did you know about London?"**

3. "A promise... I really didn't want to come in this Country... My granddad came to visit an uncle... he came, somehow to meet my husband's family... and that's it... somehow they arranged everything... me to come here... before I could say anything... and then he passed away, but I had to keep my promise."
2. "My husband took me here". (Her Husband has born in London. Then he went back to Bangladesh to get married with her).

### **Q: "How did your families come to know each other?"**

1. "My father came here for some studies...my father then got married in Bangladesh...my father then decided to set up here."

### **Q: "When you were staying in Bangladesh, which kind of information did you have about London?"**

1. "By that time I was 9 years old. It was completely like dream world. My cousin came here for vacation. He told me that London was so big, no animals, so clean; every house had a swimming pool (nda. She use to swim in Bangladesh). When I arrived in London, my father had a 1 bedroom flat and I was keeping looking for the swimming pool. My cousin told me that beds were so soft, you just switch on and the bed was going down...and then you switch off again and the bed was coming out. My cousins are here and two cousins at home...Anyway, we don't know anything about London in Bangladesh. They talk , here is completely different from us...in a better way."
2. "Nothing really... that it was a good place to live in. I've been to America before... America and London are different. America is not clean, London is clean. Small stores (in America)... supermarket in London are like this (big)."
3. "Back in my city (Dhaka) my mum used to work... I had freedom. Every work I could do there, I could do it best than in London. What I saw when I came here, it really shocked me. As I see it, London hasn't dropped me any further... but in my Country is different. Here in London I can't work... Why?"

**Q: "In which sense?"**

3. "I'd realized. It took me 13 years but I realized at the end that it didn't take me any further. But anyway when I came in this Country I saw it. It doesn't matter for me if you have big TV. It doesn't attract me. If I don't have freedom, I don't have anything."

**Q: "Once you arrived to London, how did you start to get integrated?"**

3. "So, how it started is that they are from Barisal, a village, and I'm from Dhaka. I didn't know how to fit in this place. [...] I love reading. So I went there and I saw all kinds of books, Bengali and everything. After one month I read all the Bengali books and the library lady said "Oh my god, this is the first lady that I've saw reading them all," and she told me "OK, if you want some more you should go here". She gave me one address. Probably I spent 60 pounds in one year and they gave me all these stuff and for me are really important. My mum she gets tired, at least she can read magazines, newspaper. For us, my dad, my brother, and my sisters everybody loves reading. So I feel really great that I've found a library. So I want to find some other places for more books."

**Q: "Do you think that London has changed your in-laws mentality?"**

3. "I don't know how I'll say this. But I come from a different environment so I realized that she (mother-in-law) is suffering as a woman. No freedom, so I'm thinking "I can help her". Where I come from there is mutual respect, where she comes from there is not respect at all. So what I felt was that I had to gain freedom to feel that she was free. Cause she is doing everything. So I went to the library and give her books, about everything, about your body, about how to respect your husband, even though you are Muslim. Islam says that there is freedom for us .So I took books at home from the library. For them husband is everything. I say "No, as long as you respect, there is freedom to us, we can do everything". So I said, we have to be strong. Our kids need to be successful for this life, but we have to be strong. It is not about what they want, we cannot give them everything. We need sometimes to be strong. So for example, a kid breaks a glass. You show them that that is not right. First of all, she didn't agree with what I was saying, and I said look, we have to be better, freedom, what are you going to do; you aren't just a wife, or a mum. You are something else. So I realized that when my father-in law went back home to get married again and I was thinking how could it happen all these years spent together, more than 50 years, and they don't know nothing about them. She said OK, you have to do it. If it was me I said no, I'm not feeling better, I cannot do it. I can see that, but she can't. He said no comments; I have to do it, like animals.

[...] If you got knowledge you can find out. Now she is reading almost everything, she reads and writes. So she realized that I gave her something to think about, so I show her what and husband is. When my father in law went

back home, I called my neighbours and I said "Look, maybe you'll understand because this is your age. If she feels free she can come out from it", I called them to give her support, whether she cried or got mad, or laughs. I made understand what menopause is. I didn't know obviously, but I went to my doctor, and I asked how can I make her understand. I gave her so many books to read. Sometimes she doesn't want to read them, so I do. From now, it is so much better. She understands what I want, what she wants. She doesn't mind now as before. First she was thinking "Who is going to do all this housework," but now she is fine, because I showed her, I made her understand that this is the way we need to do things, and we are together. Sometimes, if I go to pick up my kids, you can do some housework."

[1](#) For further literature regarding the effects of Globalization on society see Castells ( 2000, 1997)

[2](#) Anthias (2000) argues that transnationalism must be considered as the context which "new forms of gendered migration...need to be located" (2000:21). I use the word transnationalism in order to refer to the process of reproduction of ethnic cultures within two or more spaces.

[3](#) For further information see Butler (1990, 1993, 2004).

[4](#) UNESCO data.

[5](#) Guhathakurta, Jacobson, and Del Sordi (2007) make a further distinction. Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and USA define a migrant as a person that is "foreign-born", but within the European Union the definition changes as someone that is "foreign-nationality".

[6](#) For more details see Kritz, Lim e Zlotnik 1992; Wallerstein, 1983; Castells and Miller, 1993.

[7](#) UNESCO data

[8](#) UNFPA, State of World Population 2006.

[9](#) For more information see Walby, S (1994), Yuval-Davis (1997; 1998)

[10](#) Foucault (1990), Lois McNay (1992)

[11](#) Appadurai's examples refer to housewives that read love stories and watch soap-operas on television because they wish to change their lives; or the access to Western branded t-shirts and advertising that infest the Third world Countries.

<sup>13</sup> It is necessary to distinguish the notion of space from the one of place. According to Doreen Massey (1994), place assumes a specific and physical connotation within the notion of space, instead an abstract and general category.

[12](#)

[13](#) The idea of negotiation of subjectivity and space is not new in relation to Australian women. Chambers (1997) carried out a research about their experience within their local communities, and how this represents a great example of activism and implementation of planning principles "in favor of local needs" (1997:105).

[14](#) I've borrowed from Goffman (1969) the concept of performance. Although I disagree with Goffman's idea of subject as a simple actor, which seems to be unaware of it own experience, I instead prefer the idea of the public space as a site of performance.

[15](#) In Ahmed (2005)

[16](#) From "Exploring 20th Century London", on-line resource.

17 "People living and working in an area of east London are unhappy at plans to film the adaptation of Monica Ali's book, *Brick Lane*, in the area. They claim the book is "insulting" towards the predominately Bangladeshi community of Brick Lane, Shoreditch." In "*Brick Lane 'fury' over film plans*", BBC News on-line, Tuesday, 18 July 2006.

18 This is a comment that I've found below a video on YouTube regarding a screening of the movie "Brick Lane", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVY0YREXWgs>.

19 By 'own community', I refer to the particular ethnic group with which she shares language, culture, religion and Country of origin.

20 This way of proceeding is a current debate within methodological research. A wide bibliography is provided by Hiller, Harry H. ; DiLuzio, Linda ( 2004).

21 See Schutz (1976). Interesting is his way of analyzing the role of the researcher as a *stranger* or outsider respect the community researched.

22 The participants were previously informed about the anonymity of their experience as well as the way in which I was going to use the data collected.

<sup>23</sup> The participants are part of the same community in Tower Hamlets, but have different origin. Two of them are from different villages in Bangladesh, while the third one is from Dhaka, the capital.

23

24 See Chapter 4 for more details about how the interviews were held.

25 The analysis Ahmed (2005) does during her research is very interesting. She finds out that once back in Bangladesh, the image of home has no longer changed for Bengali women in London. Some of them realized that, despite everything, they were better adjusted to live in London rather than in their country of origin. She states: "While the migrants could dream of returning to an original 'home', the processes of globalization within which they as individuals and the communities from which they came, were inextricably bound, altered them both" (2005: 117).

26 I must admit that, from the outset 2 appeared to be really shy. The Development worker confirmed this to me. I had the impression that she must have felt uncomfortable during the first meeting, which makes me think, that I should have arranged face-to-face meetings. I offered her to arrange another meeting just the two of us, but she declined. I am still wondering if she felt this inappropriate or was simply not interested in continuing the research with me.

27 For more information regarding immigrants and illness see Sayad (2002) and Quaranta (2006). They both state that illness is a way in which the migrant reflects and manifests their disagreement and non-acceptance of their status.