Birth and Belonging in this Sceptre'd isle: How free are free choices in (re)formulating identity for young Muslim women in London's East End?

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Abstract

The "what" of Islam and the "who" of Muslims continue to attract significant attention globally and nationally. In the United Kingdom, questions of identity and belonging remain critical, with numerous studies suggesting that Muslims are often marginalised from mainstream British society. Research further indicates that young British Muslim women are increasingly prioritising religious over cultural identities as a means of resisting systemic prejudices and patriarchal structures, creating tensions within communities. However, limited attention has been paid to how the post-9/11 and 7/7 socio-political climate has shaped identity and belonging among Sylheti British Muslims. This study addresses this gap through critical autoethnography, drawing upon the author's lived experiences, memories, emotions, and dialogues to foreground the affective, relational, and political dimensions of identity formation. By situating personal narratives within broader socio-historical contexts, the thesis challenges dominant discourses on Muslim identity in Britain, offering a culturally specific and politically engaged analysis.

Adopting a chronological thematic approach, the study reinterprets the concepts of desh (home) and bidesh (abroad) as analytical frameworks to explore generational and gendered negotiations of identity and belonging. The structure comprises:

1. **The Reality of Desh-Bidesh**: Exploring first-generation migrants' transition from sojourners to settlers in the 1950s and 1960s.
2. **The Conflation of Desh-Bidesh**: Analysing family reunifications during the 1980s through an autoethnographic lens.
3. **The Myth of Desh-Bidesh**: Examining third-generation British-born young Muslim women's identity (re)formations within contemporary socio-political pressures, and their relationships with Britain, Bangladesh, and the global Muslim *Ummah*.

By examining generational shifts, gendered negotiations, religious visibility, and the impacts of Islamophobia and securitisation, the study highlights the dynamic, negotiated, and resilient nature of identity among young British Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage.

Declaration

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Dedication

For my children, my granddaughter and honorary son, And to all those others born in this sceptred Isle, descendants of those that did not.

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'Everyone sees what you appear to be; few experience what you really are.'

Niccolò Machiavelli, The Prince, Chapter XVIII, p.76

PART ONE

The Nuts and Bolts of the Study

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Prologue

In the contemporary socio-political landscape, the experiences and identities of Muslims living in Western societies have become central to academic and public discourse, particularly since the events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent 7 July 2005 bombings in London. These incidents have drastically influenced global perceptions of Islam and Muslims, often framing them within a discourse of security and radicalisation (Cesari, 2009). As Cesari (2013) notes, this shift has led to the 'securitisation of Islam', wherein Muslim communities are subject to increased scrutiny and are often viewed through a lens of suspicion. In this environment, issues of identity and belonging have taken on heightened significance, particularly among younger generations of Muslims, who must navigate the complexities of living in societies that often perceive them as the 'other'.

The study of identity and belonging among migrant communities has become a central theme in contemporary social science research, particularly in the context of globalisation and increasing transnational movements. The Sylheti Bengali diaspora in the United Kingdom offers a unique case study for examining how cultural identities are formed, maintained, and transformed across generations and geographical spaces.

Explaining or delineating identity and scrutinising the concept of belonging can be a challenging, if not arduous, endeavour. How do we comprehend a construct as complex as identity when the elements that shape or influence it—such as language, culture, and politics—are constantly changing and evolving? Similarly, the concept of belonging is deeply intertwined with ideas of location and the spaces we perceive as 'home'. Therefore, this thesis does not aim to 'nail to the wall' a definition of identity and belonging in fixed terms but rather delves into the fluid and multifaceted nature of these concepts. By combining the Sylheti Bangladeshi and British social and historical contexts, this study explores the many variegated factors that shape the evolving identities and notions of belonging within the Sylheti Bengali community in the UK.

Central to this exploration is the desh (home) and bidesh (abroad) paradigm, a concept popularised by early Sylheti Bangladeshi migrants, which articulates the duality of their lives. This kaleidoscopic paradigm conceptualises identity around the notions of self, home, and belonging, reflecting the experiences of living in both familiar and foreign contexts.

This study focuses on the identity formation and sense of belonging among British-born Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage in Tower Hamlets, East London. It explores how the desh–bidesh paradigm influences the identities of different generations within the community. The research examines the historical and socio-political factors that have shaped the Sylheti Bengali community, with particular attention to the impact of the Salman Rushdie affair and the post-9/11 and 7/7 events on identity—especially among young Sylheti Muslim women. By integrating the desh–bidesh paradigm with contemporary theories of identity and belonging, this study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of transnationalism, diaspora, and the evolving nature of identity in multicultural Britain. This exploration not only sheds light on the specific experiences of the Sylheti Bengali community but also offers insights into the broader dynamics of identity and belonging in an increasingly interconnected world.

This thesis employs an autoethnographic approach, wherein my own experiences, memories, emotions, and everyday encounters are drawn into critical dialogue with broader theoretical

frameworks. Autoethnography is not simply a methodological choice; it is a philosophical stance that recognises that personal narrative is political, subjective knowledge is valid, and lived experience can function as meaningful, rigorous data. Through a self-reflexive engagement with my own identity journey as a British Muslim woman of Sylheti Bengali heritage, I aim to illuminate the complex and dynamic processes through which identity is continuously (re)formulated.

This approach allows for a deeper interrogation of how identity and belonging are lived, experienced, and resisted within specific socio-political contexts. Rather than attempting to maintain the fiction of an impartial researcher, I explicitly position myself within the research, acknowledging my positionality and the ways in which my subjectivity inevitably shapes the knowledge produced. In doing so, I reject the traditional hierarchies that separate researcher from researched, instead embracing the entangled, relational nature of knowledge creation.

Autoethnography enables the exploration of identity in both abstract and concrete domains: through the emotional resonance of memory, the tactile recall of conversations and silences, the everyday negotiations of space and belonging, and the moments of tension and contradiction that reveal the porousness of identity boundaries. By making these processes visible, this work offers insight into the layered, contingent, and often contested nature of belonging for young Muslim women navigating life between desh and bidesh.

Furthermore, this thesis situates itself firmly within the tradition of critical autoethnography, acknowledging that the work of identity formation is inherently political. The lived realities of marginalised communities—marked by racism, Islamophobia, economic inequality, and gendered expectations—are not simply background factors; they constitute the conditions under which identity is (re)made. Therefore, this research is unapologetically political, engaging critically with the structures of power that seek to define and delimit who belongs, and on what terms.

This critical orientation extends to how ‘data’ are understood within the project. Memories, embodied experiences, and personal narratives are treated as legitimate forms of knowledge—rich with nuance and complexity—rather than being seen as anecdotal or secondary. The ‘data’ in this context are not detached or inert; they are lived, contested, and reflective of broader social realities. Reflexivity thus becomes not an add-on, but a foundational analytical tool through which I examine not only what I know, but how I come to know it—and whose voices are privileged or marginalised in the process.

In drawing on existing autoethnographic texts across fields such as migration studies, critical race theory, and feminist research, I position this thesis within a broader intellectual tradition that challenges dominant modes of inquiry. Scholars such as Carolyn Ellis, Tami Spry, and Heewon Chang have demonstrated that autoethnography enables a richer, more nuanced engagement with issues of identity, embodiment, and social justice—particularly for researchers from historically underrepresented communities. Building on their insights, this work connects the specificity of the Sylheti Bengali experience to wider discussions about race, religion, and migration in contemporary Britain.

This study also responds to the relative paucity of research specifically addressing the experiences of British Bangladeshi Sylheti’s—particularly women—in the context of post-9/11 Britain. In doing so, it contributes to the literature on British Muslim identities, offering a focused, culturally specific, and politically grounded analysis that foregrounds gendered and generational differences in experiences of belonging and exclusion.

Ultimately, this thesis asks not only how young Sylheti Muslim women (re)negotiate their identities, but also what is at stake in these negotiations: what kinds of belonging are possible or foreclosed; what futures are imagined or denied; and how acts of resistance, resilience, and reimagination emerge within everyday life. Through this exploration, it seeks to offer new ways of understanding the shifting terrain of identity and belonging in a sceptical, securitised Britain—and to assert the critical importance of telling our own stories, on our own terms.

1.2 Thesis Structure

This thesis is organised into four main parts, comprising nine chapters, which explore the intricate dynamics of identity and belonging within the Sylheti Bengali community through the lens of the desh–bidesh paradigm.

Part One lays the groundwork for the study. Chapter 1 introduces the background, research aims, and rationale of the thesis. It also includes a reflective analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic which, while presenting unique challenges, offered an opportunity for reflection and adaptation. This analysis considers how the pandemic affected the broader themes of identity and belonging central to this research.

Following this is Desh–Bidesh: Introduction to a Kaleidoscopic Paradigm, a section that introduces the reader to the desh–bidesh paradigm—a crucial framework for understanding the dual identity experienced by Sylheti Bengalis as they navigate life between two worlds. This paradigm serves as a guiding lens throughout the thesis, enabling an exploration of how cultural heritage and contemporary life in Britain intersect for the community.

Chapter 2 presents a thorough literature review, examining theoretical frameworks on identity and belonging, Muslim identity formation, and the desh–bidesh paradigm. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, including research design and the analytical framework, while also addressing the ethical considerations and limitations of the study.

Part Two forms the core of the thesis. It comprises three thematic chapters that explore the lived experiences of the desh–bidesh paradigm across generations. Chapter 4, *The Reality of Desh–Bidesh*, examines the first generation of Sylheti migrants, mapping their journey from sojourners to settlers in the UK. Chapter 5, *The Conflation of Desh–Bidesh*, investigates the dynamics of identity shifts within the second generation, particularly during the process of family reunification in the 1980s. Chapter 6, *The Myth of Desh–Bidesh*, explores the experiences of third-generation British-born Sylheti Bengalis, with a focus on how the Salman Rushdie affair and post-9/11 events have shaped their identity, belonging, and religious self-understanding in the UK.

Chapter 7, Raising British-Born Children of Sylheti Bengali Heritage: Identity, Belonging and Choices, examines the multifaceted identity choices faced by British-born Muslims of Bengali heritage. This chapter weaves together personal reflection and theoretical analysis, concluding Part Two.

Part Three discusses the findings and their theoretical implications. Chapter 8 synthesises the research findings and compares them with existing literature, highlighting the broader theoretical contributions to the study of identity, belonging, and transnationalism.

Part Four concludes the thesis. Chapter 9 offers final reflections, summarising the key findings, contributions to knowledge, and recommendations for future research—particularly in relation to the desh–bidesh framework and its continued relevance in the study of diasporic identities.

1.3 Research Question, Aims and Objectives

Research questions:
In the endeavour to answer the primary research question,

How free are free choices in (re)formulating identity for young Muslim women in London's East End?

I will be exploring these supplementary questions:

1. How have the socio-political events post-9/11 and 7/7 influenced the identity and sense of belonging among British-born Muslims, particularly among young women of Sylheti Bengali heritage?
This question aims to explore the impact of significant socio-political events on identity formation and belonging within a specific demographic, focusing on the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and age.

2. In what ways do the concepts of desh (home) and bidesh (abroad) shape the generational differences in identity and belonging among Sylheti Bengali migrants and their British-born descendants?
This question seeks to investigate the role of the desh-bidesh paradigm in understanding the evolving nature of identity across different generations within the Sylheti Bengali community in the UK.

3. How do young British Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage navigate the tensions between their religious and cultural identities in the context of pervasive prejudices and patriarchal structures?
This question focuses on the identity (re)formulation of young British Muslim women as they negotiate their religious and cultural identities amid external societal pressures and internal community dynamics.

Research Aims

The primary aim of this research is to explore the complexities of identity and belonging among British-born Muslims, particularly young women of Sylheti Bengali heritage, in the post-9/11 and 7/7 socio-political context. The study seeks to understand how these individuals navigate their religious, cultural, and national identities within the framework of the desh (home) and bidesh (abroad) paradigm. By examining generational shifts and the impact of socio-political pressures, this research aims to provide a nuanced interpretation of identity formation and reformulation among this community.

Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the complex dynamics of identity formation and belonging among Sylheti Bengalis in the UK, with a particular focus on the influence of the desh-bidesh paradigm. Based on the study's overarching focus, the research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Historical and Socio-Political Context:

Objective: To examine the historical and socio-political context of Sylheti Bengali migration to the UK and how the desh-bidesh paradigm has influenced identity and belonging among the first generation of migrants. This will involve analysing historical records, literature, and existing studies on Sylheti Bengali migration, focusing on early migrants' experiences and their conceptualisation of identity within the desh-bidesh framework.

2. Exploring the Desh-Bidesh Paradigm in Identity Formation:
Objective: To explore the significance of the desh-bidesh paradigm in shaping the identities and sense of belonging among Sylheti Bengalis in the UK. This includes examining how the concepts of desh (home) and bidesh (abroad) influence the identity and belonging of both the first generation of migrants and their descendants.

3. Generational Identity Formation:
Objective: To analyse the identity formation and reformulation processes among the second and third generations of British-born Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage, with particular attention to gender and age dynamics. This will involve investigating how identity and belonging evolve across generations, emphasising differences between male and female experiences and how these are shaped by age and the socio-political context.

4. Impact of Socio-Political Events on Identity:
Objective: To assess the impact of the post-9/11 and 7/7 socio-political climate on the identity and sense of belonging among young British Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage. This will include a critical analysis of how these events have influenced the prioritisation of religious identity over cultural identity among young Muslim women, considering both external prejudices and internal community dynamics.

5. Integration of the Desh-Bidesh Paradigm in Contemporary Theory:
Objective: To contribute to the broader theoretical understanding of transnationalism and diaspora studies through the lens of the desh-bidesh paradigm. This will involve developing a conceptual framework that integrates this paradigm with contemporary theories of identity and belonging, offering insights into multiculturalism and migration studies.

6. Extending Literature on British Muslim Identities:
Objective: To challenge and extend existing literature on British Muslim identities by offering a narrative that incorporates the social and historical contexts of both Bangladesh and the UK, particularly in relation to the Sylheti community. This will involve synthesising the findings from this research with existing studies, identifying gaps, and proposing new avenues for research on British Muslim identities.

1.4 Research Rationale

This study is grounded in the imperative to deepen our understanding of the complex identities and lived experiences of the Sylheti Bengali diaspora in the UK, particularly through the lens of the desh-bidesh paradigm. As global migration continues to reshape societies, examining how specific migrant communities negotiate their identities, sense of belonging, and cultural attachments across geographic and cultural contexts becomes increasingly critical. This research offers both theoretical and practical insights into these dynamics, addressing significant gaps in the literature while informing policy, community engagement, and future scholarship.

Migration encompasses not only physical relocation but also intricate processes of identity negotiation. The Sylheti Bengali community in the UK, with its long-standing transnational ties

and layered migration history, provides a compelling case for exploring these processes. The desh-bidesh paradigm captures the duality between homeland (desh) and host country (bidesh), offering a culturally embedded framework that remains underexplored in migration discourse (Gardner, 2002; Eade & Garbin, 2006). This study leverages that framework to examine how Sylheti Bengalis construct and navigate identity, balancing cultural heritage with the demands of integration into British society. Amidst accelerating globalisation and transnational flows, such dual influences are shaping, and being shaped by, the migrant experience. Understanding this interplay contributes to more nuanced theories of identity within diasporic communities, particularly those sustaining transnational ties.

Although considerable work has been done on South Asian migration to the UK, the specific experiences of Sylheti Bengalis have often been overshadowed by broader generalisations about South Asian or Muslim communities. Such generalisations overlook distinct cultural and regional identities, including those of the Sylhetis (Modood, 2007; Gardner, 1995). By concentrating on this particular group, the study offers a more focused exploration that enhances our understanding of South Asian diasporic identity. Additionally, the intersections of gender and generation within the desh-bidesh paradigm remain relatively unexplored. While existing research has addressed gender roles and generational differences in South Asian communities, more granular analysis is needed—especially concerning Sylheti women and youth (Kabeer, 2000; Dwyer, 2000). This study attends to those intersections, offering insights that are both culturally specific and widely applicable to migrant experiences elsewhere.

The UK's socio-political landscape, particularly in the wake of the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, has significantly shaped the experiences of Muslim communities, including the Sylheti diaspora. Heightened scrutiny and suspicion have often led to stereotyping and marginalisation (Cesari, 2013). Within this context, identity and belonging have become even more complex, as individuals contend with societal pressures and communal expectations. The desh-bidesh framework proves particularly pertinent here, illuminating the ways in which Sylheti Bengalis maintain attachments to both homeland and host society. Investigating how this community navigates such dual affiliations amid socio-political tension contributes to more inclusive understandings of British Muslim identities. Accordingly, this research has practical relevance, offering evidence-based insights for promoting social cohesion, integration, and multicultural policy development.

The findings of this study can inform social policy and community engagement strategies designed to support migrant populations. An understanding of the desh-bidesh paradigm enables policymakers to develop culturally responsive approaches that recognise the dual attachments many migrants hold. This is vital in sectors such as education, social services, and local governance, where awareness of complex identity formations can enhance inclusivity (Modood, 2007). Furthermore, this research challenges monolithic representations of Muslims in the UK by foregrounding the diverse experiences within the Sylheti Bengali community. In doing so, it contributes to efforts to combat Islamophobia and advance more nuanced conceptions of British identity. The implications extend beyond academic discourse, informing community practice and public understanding.

Ultimately, this study advances both conceptual and applied knowledge in the fields of migration, identity, and transnationalism. The desh-bidesh paradigm, while grounded in the Sylheti context, offers a valuable model for understanding identity across diasporic settings. Its integration with broader migration theories enriches scholarly debate and provides practitioners with culturally sensitive tools to engage with migrant communities.

In summary, this research rationale underscores the study's significance in filling key gaps in the literature, particularly around the underexamined desh-bidesh framework. By highlighting the lived realities of Sylheti Bengalis in the UK, the study contributes to broader discourses on identity, belonging, and integration in an increasingly interconnected world.

1.5 Overview of the Research Topic

The exploration of identity and belonging within migrant communities has become central to contemporary social science, especially amid globalisation and expanding transnational networks. The Sylheti Bengali diaspora in the United Kingdom offers a unique context to examine how cultural identities are constructed, sustained, and transformed across generations and geographies.

This study investigates identity formation and belonging among British-born Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage in Tower Hamlets, East London. It explores how the desh-bidesh paradigm—referring to desh (home) and bidesh (abroad)—influences intergenerational identity within the community.

The research situates the experiences of Sylheti Bengalis within their historical and socio-political context, with particular attention to the effects of post-9/11 and 7/7 on identity construction, especially for young Muslim women. By merging the desh-bidesh concept with contemporary identity and diaspora theory, this study offers insights into the broader dynamics of transnationalism and the evolving contours of identity in multicultural Britain.

The desh-bidesh paradigm reflects the dual allegiances Sylheti Bengalis maintain to both Sylhet, Bangladesh, and the UK. This duality is emblematic of many migrant experiences: reconciling cultural preservation with the realities of adaptation. Desh represents not just a physical homeland but a locus of cultural, familial, and emotional connection. Bidesh, by contrast, symbolises opportunity and challenge, marked by both alienation and assimilation (Gardner, 2002; Eade & Garbin, 2006). Generational shifts complicate these attachments. First-generation migrants often regard desh as their true home, while subsequent generations, born and raised in Britain, develop hybrid identities rooted in both spaces. This study examines how different generations interpret and negotiate these dualities, revealing the intricate processes of identity formation in diasporic contexts.

The history of Sylheti migration to the UK, dating back to the early 20th century, is essential to understanding the desh-bidesh framework. Early Sylheti men arrived as seamen and later settled as labourers, particularly after World War II. Over time, they established permanent communities, especially in East London, where cultural practices and kinship networks from Sylhet have endured (Adams, 1987). Tower Hamlets has since emerged as a key centre for the diaspora, hosting the largest Sylheti Bengali population outside Bangladesh. Migration initially seen as temporary gradually evolved into settlement, giving rise to identities that straddle both origin and destination. This study situates current identity negotiations within this historical continuum.

The post-9/11 and 7/7 era has introduced new challenges for Muslim identity in Britain. These events intensified scrutiny, embedding Muslim communities within narratives of threat and surveillance (Cesari, 2013). For young Sylheti Bengalis, especially women, such scrutiny compounds the already complex task of balancing desh-bidesh affiliations. This study explores how younger generations manage identity in a climate that questions their belonging. It also addresses gendered and generational distinctions in navigating these dual spaces, focusing on how community members articulate identity amid cultural expectation and societal pressure.

In contributing to migration and identity scholarship, this research brings a culturally specific lens to broader theoretical discussions. While transnationalism has gained traction in migration studies, the desh-bidesh framework adds depth by foregrounding how cultural worldviews shape identity negotiations (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992). The Sylheti Bengali experience exemplifies the importance of context-specific analysis in countering homogenising narratives about migrants.

Practically, the study offers insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders. Recognising desh-bidesh dynamics can inform inclusive practices in education, public services, and interfaith engagement. Educational initiatives that embrace dual identity can enhance belonging among young British Muslims. Moreover, the research contributes to anti-Islamophobia efforts by illuminating the nuanced, often overlooked experiences of Muslim communities, helping to reframe public discourse around British multiculturalism.

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive examination of the desh-bidesh paradigm as it shapes identity among Sylheti Bengalis in the UK. By engaging with both theoretical and applied dimensions of migration and identity, it responds to contemporary debates and contributes to more inclusive understandings of belonging in plural societies.

1.6 Reflective Analysis: The Research, the researcher and COVID-19, Doing Research in God's own country during a global pandemic

Following a successful transfer viva, I was eager to move forward with my research, energised and excited. However, just a few months later, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the UK, fundamentally altering life as we knew it. The way we work, and study changed dramatically. While we can now reflect on some of these changes with a more positive perspective, at the time, it felt dark and uncertain. My initial momentum was halted, and for a period, time seemed suspended. As the eldest in my family, I had always been the one to handle crises, developing a habit of "sorting first, feeling later". During the pandemic, this automatic coping mechanism took over, and only now, years later, do the emotional impacts surface from time to time.

The pandemic necessitated a swift transition to remote research and learning, which presented a double-edged sword for PhD students. On the one hand, digital tools and online platforms provided a means for academic engagement to continue despite the physical distancing measures in place. Virtual conferences, online workshops, and remote collaborations enabled students to maintain a degree of interaction and scholarly exchange (Kobayashi et al., 2020). On the other hand, this shift introduced significant hurdles. For those whose research depended on physical experiments, laboratory work, or in-person data collection, the transition to remote work proved particularly challenging. Many were forced to pivot to computational or theoretical approaches, often misaligned with their original research objectives (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

Furthermore, disparities in access to specialised software, high-performance computing, and other technical resources exacerbated the difficulties, creating uneven research productivity across disciplines. Even students whose work did not rely on laboratory or fieldwork encountered obstacles—for example, navigating the loss of peer collaboration and access to resources essential for sustained academic progress. As universities and libraries closed, access to resources became a critical issue, forcing students to rely heavily on digital materials. While many institutions expanded online access to journals and e-books, the lack of physical access to essential materials created significant gaps, especially for those conducting historical or archival research (Waterfield, 2020). I was fortunate to have a personal library of relevant books, but even with this advantage, the shift to digital communication posed its own set of challenges.

The invaluable feedback once gained through in-person meetings with supervisors and peers was now replaced by digital chats and emails. While these tools ensured a level of continuity, they lacked the immediacy and richness of face-to-face interactions, making it more difficult to sustain the same depth of support and motivation (Johnson, Veletsianos, and Seaman, 2020). However, I was again fortunate. My supervisors were exceptionally generous with their time and demonstrated great compassion and understanding, ensuring we remained in contact through whatever medium was most suitable—whether emails, video calls, or even WhatsApp—whenever needed.

The pandemic significantly exacerbated the mental health challenges faced by PhD students, who were already a vulnerable population due to high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Evans et al., 2018). The additional pressures of health concerns, academic disruptions, and uncertainties about future career prospects heightened these mental health issues. A study by Cao et al. (2020) found that over 50% of university students reported moderate to severe anxiety during the pandemic, with PhD students particularly affected due to the uncertainty surrounding their research timelines. The isolation caused by social distancing measures

further compounded feelings of loneliness and helplessness, making it even more difficult to stay motivated and focused on research.

Financial strain was another major source of stress during the pandemic. Many students relied on teaching assistantships, research grants, or part-time jobs to support themselves and their families. The economic downturn led to reduced funding opportunities and job losses, placing additional financial pressure on students. International students, in particular, faced visa uncertainties and travel restrictions, creating further obstacles to continuing their studies (Huang and Zhao, 2020). These financial challenges forced some students to make difficult decisions, such as pausing their studies or even dropping out altogether (The World Bank, 2020).

The pandemic also highlighted and deepened existing inequities in academia. According to Minello (2020), students from underrepresented groups—including women, people of colour, and those from low-income backgrounds—were disproportionately affected. For example, women PhD students with caregiving responsibilities faced additional challenges in balancing academic work with domestic duties during lockdowns. These disparities raised concerns about the long-term impact on diversity in academia, as the loss of research productivity and financial strain could discourage students from pursuing academic careers, particularly those from marginalised groups (O'Connor, 2020).

In addition to the logistical and financial challenges, the shift to remote work blurred the boundaries between personal and academic life. PhD students had to develop new strategies to manage their workloads while contending with the broader uncertainties of the pandemic. This constant juggling of responsibilities made it difficult to maintain focus and productivity, leading to feelings of guilt and frustration. The time lost in attempting to progress according to initial research plans only heightened these feelings, creating a vicious cycle of procrastination and further delays.

Despite these challenges, there were moments of unexpected gratitude during this time. One of the reasons Yorkshire is called "God's Own Country" is its stunning natural scenery, and I became acutely aware of the stark contrast between the rolling hills visible from my window and the dense urban landscape I had left behind in Tower Hamlets. This awareness was sharpened by the knowledge that my mother and siblings were still living in that urban environment, grappling with the pandemic in a space where green areas were scarce and the pressure of the city was unrelenting.

1.6.1. Tower Hamlets and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on communities worldwide, but its effects were particularly acute within certain ethnic and religious minority groups. Among these, the British Sylheti Bengali Muslim community in Tower Hamlets faced unique challenges shaped by socio-economic disparities, cultural practices, and systemic issues within public health and social care.

One of the most significant impacts of COVID-19 on the community was the disproportionate burden of illness and mortality. Public Health England (2020) reported that individuals from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds—including Sylheti Bengalis—were at a higher risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19 compared to the white population. Several factors contributed to this disparity, including pre-existing health conditions, socio-economic status, and living conditions.

Many Sylheti Bengali Muslims suffer from chronic health conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity—known risk factors for severe COVID-19 outcomes (Khunti et al., 2020). These health issues are exacerbated by socio-economic inequalities, including the prevalence of densely populated urban housing, which facilitated the spread of the virus (Platt and Warwick, 2020). Furthermore, multigenerational households—common in the community—increased the risk of intra-household transmission, particularly affecting elderly family members who were most vulnerable to severe disease (Razaq et al., 2020).

The socio-economic impact of the pandemic also weighed heavily on the community. Many worked in low-income, insecure jobs in sectors such as hospitality, retail, and transport—among the hardest hit by lockdowns and social distancing measures. As a result, many families experienced job losses, reduced income, and heightened financial insecurity (Patel et al., 2020). Barriers to accessing government support, including language difficulties and digital exclusion, further complicated efforts to secure financial assistance during this challenging period (Qureshi et al., 2021). The closure of community centres and places of worship—which often serve as hubs for information, support, and social connection—compounded the isolation and worsened access to essential services.

The pandemic also illuminated educational disparities. Sylheti Bengali Muslim children faced difficulties accessing online learning due to limited access to technology and internet connectivity at home. The digital divide widened the educational attainment gap, potentially affecting the long-term academic and career prospects of young Bengali Muslims (Vyas and Woodhead, 2020). This disparity reflected broader issues of exclusion and inequality, further underscoring the challenges the community faced.

Cultural and religious practices played a central role in shaping the community's response to the pandemic, as religious gatherings and the mosque are vital aspects of communal life. However, the pandemic necessitated the closure of mosques and the suspension of communal prayers, which profoundly affected the community (Mukadam and Mawby, 2021). Additionally, Islamic funeral rites—such as the washing of the deceased's body and communal prayers—were restricted, leading to significant distress. Religious leaders and scholars had to collaborate with health authorities to balance public health concerns with religious obligations (Khunti et al., 2020). The pandemic also prompted a shift in burial practices, as elders who had once hoped to be buried in *desh* were confronted with the possibility that returning to Bangladesh for burial might no longer be feasible.

Misinformation and mistrust in public health messaging further complicated the community's response to the pandemic. Language barriers, mistrust of authorities, and reliance on informal sources of information contributed to vaccine hesitancy and resistance to public health measures (Razai et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, local community leaders, imams, and healthcare professionals played a crucial role in disseminating culturally sensitive and accurate information, which helped improve compliance and vaccine uptake over time.

Despite the overwhelming difficulties, the British Sylheti Bengali Muslim community displayed remarkable resilience. Local organisations, mosques, and community groups swiftly mobilised to provide aid—delivering food and medicine to vulnerable individuals, offering financial assistance, and providing mental health support. The strong social networks within the community and its traditions of mutual aid were essential in helping members cope with the challenges of the pandemic (Khan, 2020). Moreover, the shift to digital platforms enabled virtual religious services, educational programmes, and social events, maintaining a sense of community even during lockdowns (Mukadam and Mawby, 2021).

A positive outcome was increased digital literacy, especially among women and the elderly, with many embracing video calls and other digital tools to stay connected with family in desh, making communication across continents more accessible. The role of youth in the community was particularly notable, as younger members—often more digitally literate—bridged the digital divide by helping older family members access online services and information. Youth also assumed leadership roles in organising community responses, demonstrating the potential for intergenerational collaboration in times of crisis (Vyas and Woodhead, 2020).

1.6.1.a Identity and Belonging

The pandemic also brought to the forefront deeper questions of identity and belonging. As the crisis unfolded, many found that their sense of identity was reinforced through their connection to religious and cultural practices, providing continuity and stability amidst the uncertainty. For some, the isolation experienced during the pandemic exacerbated feelings of marginalisation, particularly as socio-economic disparities became more apparent. The closure of key communal spaces, such as mosques, further challenged the community's sense of belonging. However, the collective response to the pandemic—through mutual aid, community resilience, and digital innovation—strengthened communal bonds and affirmed a shared sense of identity within the community. For many, this period became a time of reflection on what it means to belong, both to their immediate community and to British society as a whole.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the research landscape, presenting unprecedented challenges for PhD students. The shift to remote work facilitated a degree of continuity but also introduced numerous obstacles—from limited access to resources and communication difficulties to heightened mental health and financial pressures. These challenges were particularly acute for students from underrepresented groups, raising important questions about equity and inclusion in higher education. While the pandemic underscored the importance of resilience and adaptability, it also highlighted the need for greater institutional support to ensure that all students, regardless of background, can navigate such difficult periods without compromising their academic or personal well-being.

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges for the British Sylheti Bengali Muslim community, it also demonstrated the community's resilience and adaptability. The crisis brought attention to long-standing socio-economic and health disparities but also reinforced the importance of cultural and religious identity as sources of strength and belonging. Through digital innovations, intergenerational collaboration, and community mobilisation, the British Sylheti Bengali Muslim community not only endured the crisis but, in many ways, emerged stronger in the face of adversity.

1.7 Desh-Bidesh Paradigm - Introduction to a Kaleidoscopic Paradigm

The desh-bidesh paradigm, rooted in the experiences of the Sylheti Bengali diaspora, is a conceptual framework that explores the duality of identity and belonging as experienced by migrants. In Bengali, desh translates to "home" or "homeland," typically referring to one's place of birth, of origin, while bidesh means abroad" or foreign land" referring to the adopted country. This paradigm captures the complex, often contradictory, experiences of migrants who live between two worlds—one defined by their cultural and historical roots, and the other by the realities of life in a foreign land. This duality is particularly evident in the lives of the Sylheti Bengali community in the UK, where migration and settlement processes have profoundly influenced their identity and sense of belonging. This introduction delves into the historical, artistic, cultural, and theoretical underpinnings of the desh-bidesh paradigm, exploring its relevance to contemporary studies of migration, identity, and transnationalism.

The Sylheti Bengali community, originating from the Sylhet region in northeastern Bangladesh, has a long history of migration, driven by both economic and social factors. The first significant wave of Sylheti migration to the UK began in the early 20th century, with young men seeking employment opportunities in British merchant ships and later in various industries across the UK, particularly in London (Adams, 1987). However, it was the post-World War II labour shortages in the UK that accelerated the migration of Sylhetis, as Britain sought workers to rebuild its war-torn economy. Many Sylheti men initially came as sojourners, intending to return home after earning enough money. Over time, these temporary migrations became more permanent, as family reunifications and community settlements took root, particularly in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (Eade & Garbin, 2006).

This historical trajectory of migration laid the foundation for the desh-bidesh paradigm. For the early migrants, desh represented not just a physical homeland but also a cultural and emotional anchor—a place imbued with memories, traditions, and familial ties. Bidesh, on the other hand, was associated with economic opportunity but also with alienation, racism, and the challenges of adapting to a foreign culture (Gardner, 2002). The tension between these two worlds has shaped the identity of the Sylheti diaspora, creating a persistent duality that continues to influence subsequent generations. In the Sylheti Bengali community, desh and bidesh are more than just geographical locations; they are cultural constructs that embody different aspects of identity and belonging. Desh is often romanticised as a place of purity, tradition, and authenticity—a spiritual and cultural home that provides a sense of rootedness and continuity (Gardner, 1995). It is where one's ancestors are buried, where family bonds are strongest, and where cultural practices are most faithfully observed. For many Sylhetis, maintaining a connection to desh is crucial for preserving their cultural identity, even when living abroad. Conversely, bidesh is often viewed with ambivalence. While it represents opportunity and economic advancement, it is also a place of dislocation and cultural erosion (Kibria, 2011). In bidesh, Sylhetis must navigate the complexities of a different social and cultural landscape, where their identity is often questioned or misunderstood. The experience of living in bidesh can lead to a sense of alienation and a longing for the familiarity and comfort of desh. However, it can also lead to new forms of identity that blend elements of both desh and bidesh, creating a hybrid cultural space where traditional and modern values coexist.

The paradigm of desh-bidesh is a recurring theme in Bengali literature, offering a rich tapestry of narratives that delve into the complexities of identity, belonging, and displacement. Rabindranath Tagore, one of the foremost literary figures of Bengal, often explored this theme in his works. In his novel "Ghare Baire" (The Home and the World), is a classic example of this exploration. Tagore juxtaposes the inner, traditional world of the home (desh) with the outer, modern world influenced by Western ideas (bidesh). The protagonist, Bimala, embodies this conflict as she navigates her loyalty to her husband and her attraction to the charismatic nationalist leader, Sandip. Tagore's portrayal of Bimala's internal struggle reflects the broader cultural tensions between tradition and modernity that characterised the Bengali Renaissance (Tagore, 1916).

Additionally, Tagore's exploration of Desh-Bidesh in his works reflects his own experiences of traveling and living abroad, as well as his deep attachment to his homeland (Tagore, 1916). Similarly, in Tagore's collection of poems "Gitanjali" (Song Offerings), the poet reflects on his travels to foreign lands and the subsequent longing for his homeland. The poem "Where the mind is without fear" can be interpreted as a yearning for a world where the distinctions between desh and bidesh are dissolved, and a universal humanism prevails (Tagore, 1910). Another significant work that explores the desh-bidesh paradigm is Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's "Pather Dabi" (The Right of Way; or Demands of the Road) The novel portrays the struggles of Indian revolutionaries against British colonial rule, emphasising the dichotomy between the colonised homeland and the coloniser's land. Through the character of Sabyasachi, Chattopadhyay delves into the emotional and ideological conflicts that arise from living in a colonised desh while yearning for freedom and justice (Chattopadhyay, 1926).

The works of the poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam, known as the "Rebel Poet", also reflect the desh-bidesh paradigm. His poem "Bidrohi" (The Rebel) captures the essence of rebellion against oppression and the quest for freedom, symbolising the struggle to reclaim one's desh from foreign domination (Islam, 1922). Nazrul's works reflect his own experiences of exile and displacement, as well as his deep commitment to the cause of Indian independence. Known for his revolutionary spirit, Nazrul's songs and poems often express a strong sense of identity and resistance against colonial oppression. Songs like "Durgam Giri Kantar Moru" (Over the steep mountains and deserts) and "Kandari Hushiar" (O Captain, Beware) capture the spirit of rebellion and the longing for freedom, symbolising the struggle to reclaim desh from foreign domination (Islam, 1922).

Bengali music, both traditional and contemporary, has also been a significant medium for expressing the desh-bidesh paradigm. The themes of longing, nostalgia, and the emotional ties to the homeland are prevalent in many Bengali songs, particularly from the folk song genre, reflecting the cultural and psychological dimensions of desh-bidesh. Tagore's vast repertoire of songs, known as Rabindra Sangeet, often explores the themes of desh and bidesh. For instance, the song "Amar Shonar Bangla" (My Golden Bengal), which later became the national anthem of Bangladesh, evokes a deep sense of love and longing for the homeland. The lyrics celebrate the beauty and cultural richness of Bengal, reinforcing the emotional bond with desh (Tagore, 1910). Similarly, the song "Ekla Cholo Re" (Walk Alone) resonates with the theme of resilience and the solitary journey often associated with living away from one's homeland. Tagore's songs frequently address the emotional conflicts and reconciliations of individuals navigating between desh and bidesh, offering solace and inspiration (Tagore, 1910).

In contemporary Bengali music, the desh-bidesh theme continues to resonate. The songs of modern Bengali bands and artists often reflect the experiences of the diaspora, exploring themes of displacement, identity, and the longing for the homeland. For example, the band

Chand rabindoo's song "Ure Jaak" (Fly Away) captures the feelings of a young individual leaving home for better opportunities abroad, wrestling with the emotional pull of the homeland and the allure of the foreign land. Moreover, the genre of Baul music, with its emphasis on spiritual exploration and the rejection of materialism, often addresses the metaphorical journey between the spiritual homeland (desh) and the material world (bidesh). Baul songs, with their philosophical lyrics and soulful melodies, explore the inner conflicts and spiritual journeys of individuals, often transcending the physical boundaries of desh and bidesh. Bengali music, both traditional and contemporary, has also been a significant medium for expressing the desh-bidesh paradigm. The themes of longing, nostalgia, and the emotional ties to the homeland are prevalent in many Bengali songs, particularly from the folk song genre, reflecting the cultural and psychological dimensions of desh-bidesh.

The desh-bidesh paradigm extends beyond artistic expressions into the broader cultural and socio-political landscape of Bengal. The emotional and cultural dichotomy between desh and bidesh has significantly influenced the Bengali diaspora, shaping their identities and experiences. During the colonial period, the exposure to Western education and ideas led to the emergence of a class of Western-educated Bengalis who often found themselves caught between the values of their homeland and the allure of the foreign land. This "Bhodrolook" class played a pivotal role in the nationalist movement, advocating for the preservation of Bengali culture and identity while also embracing certain Western ideals of progression and modernity (Brah, 1996).

The partition of Bengal in 1947 further complicated the desh-bidesh paradigm. The division of Bengal into East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) and West Bengal (a state in India) created a new dimension of displacement and identity crisis. Millions of Bengalis were uprooted from their ancestral homes, leading to a profound sense of loss and nostalgia for their desh. The refugees who migrated to India often faced challenges in assimilating into the new socio-political environment, further accentuating the desh-bidesh dichotomy (Spivak, 1988). In contemporary times, globalisation and economic migration have added new layers to the paradigm. The Bengali diaspora, spread across the globe, continues to grapple with issues of identity and belonging. The digital age has facilitated greater connectivity with the homeland, allowing the diaspora to maintain cultural ties and participate in the socio-cultural life of Bengal. However, the longing for the homeland and the challenges of living in a foreign land remain potent themes in the lives of many Bengalis abroad (Hall, 1990).

The desh-bidesh paradigm can be critically examined through various theoretical lenses, including postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, and cultural studies. Postcolonial theory offers insights into the ways in which colonialism and its aftermath have shaped the identities and experiences of Bengalis. The works of Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Edward Said provide valuable frameworks for understanding the cultural and psychological impacts of colonialism on the Bengali psyche (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988; Said, 1978). Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" is particularly relevant in the context of desh-bidesh. Hybridity refers to the creation of new cultural forms and identities through the interaction of coloniser and colonised cultures. The Bengali experience of desh-bidesh can be seen as a form of hybridity, where traditional Bengali culture and Western influences merge to create new cultural expressions and identities (Bhabha, 1994). Gayatri Spivak's notion of the "subaltern" also provides a critical perspective on the paradigm. The subaltern, or marginalised voices, often experience the tensions of desh-bidesh in more pronounced ways.

The experiences of Bengali women, lower-caste individuals, and other marginalised groups add layers of complexity to the understanding of desh-bidesh (Spivak, 1988). Diaspora studies offer

another critical framework for examining the desh-bidesh paradigm. Scholars like Avtar Brah and Stuart Hall have explored the ways in which diasporic communities negotiate their identities and maintain connections with their homelands. The Bengali diaspora's experiences of displacement, nostalgia, and cultural retention reflect broader themes in diaspora studies (Brah, 1996; Hall, 1990). Cultural studies, with its focus on the intersections of culture, power, and identity, provides valuable tools for analysing the desh-bidesh paradigm. The works of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall highlight the ways in which cultural practices and representations shape and reflect social realities. The literary and cultural expressions of desh-bidesh in Bengali culture can be seen as sites of negotiation and resistance, where individuals and communities grapple with the complexities of their identities (Williams, 1980; Hall, 1990)

The cultural significance of desh and bidesh is further complicated by the dynamics of transnationalism. As Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton (1992) argue, transnationalism allows migrants to maintain active connections across national borders, leading to the creation of transnational social fields. For Sylhetis, these transnational ties often involve regular visits to Bangladesh, remittances sent back to family members, and participation in cultural and religious practices that span both the UK and Bangladesh. These activities reinforce the connection to desh while also influencing life in bidesh, making the two realms deeply interdependent.

The desh-bidesh paradigm plays a crucial role in the formation of identity among the Sylheti Bengali diaspora. Identity, as theorised by scholars like Stuart Hall (1996), is not fixed but is constantly in flux, shaped by cultural, historical, and social contexts. For Sylhetis, the tension between desh and bidesh creates a space where identity is negotiated and redefined. This negotiation is particularly evident in the second and third generations of British-born Sylhetis, who must reconcile their cultural heritage with their lived experiences in the UK. For the first generation of Sylheti migrants, identity was often anchored in desh, with bidesh viewed as a temporary phase. However, for subsequent generations, the concept of desh becomes more abstract, representing an idealised version of cultural and familial origins rather than a lived reality (Gardner, 2002). These younger generations may have limited direct experience of desh, yet it remains a significant reference point in their identity formation. At the same time, their experiences in bidesh—including interactions with British society, education, and the labour market—shape their sense of self in ways that diverge from the first generation. The result is a hybrid identity that incorporates elements of both desh and bidesh, reflecting the complexities of living in a globalised world.

The paradigm also intersects with gender and generational dynamics. Gender roles in Sylheti culture are traditionally defined, with women often expected to uphold cultural and religious practices that maintain the connection to desh (Kabeer, 2000). In bidesh, these expectations can create tensions, particularly for younger women who may seek greater autonomy and opportunities outside the home. Generational differences further complicate the desh-bidesh dynamic. The first generation often retains strong ties to desh, while the second and third generations may feel more at home in bidesh, leading to different interpretations of identity and belonging. These generational shifts are indicative of broader changes in the Sylheti community, as younger members adapt to the realities of life in the UK while negotiating the cultural expectations of their elders (Eade, 1997).

In contemporary times, the desh-bidesh paradigm continues to resonate with Bengalis both in Bengal and the diaspora. The rapid advancements in communication technology have transformed the ways in which individuals connect with their homeland. Social media platforms, online communities, and digital media have enabled the Bengali diaspora to

maintain cultural ties and participate in the socio-cultural life of Bengal. Virtual celebrations of Bengali festivals, online literary forums, and digital archives of Bengali literature and music have become important means of bridging the desh-bidesh divide (Hall, 1990). However, the longing for the homeland and the challenges of living in a foreign land remain potent themes in the lives of many Bengalis abroad. The paradigm resonates deeply with the first generations whilst the experiences of second-generation immigrants, who navigate the cultural expectations of their parents and the influences of their host countries, add new dimensions to the desh-bidesh discourse.

There is then, the paradox; the generation born in bidesh for whom it is argued that desh bidesh is a myth, an inherited notion inverted. The intergenerational transmission of cultural values and the negotiation of hybrid identities continue to shape the Bengali experience of desh-bidesh (Brah, 1996). Moreover, the socio-political dynamics of Bengal continue to influence the desh-bidesh paradigm. Issues such as migration, border conflicts, and cultural nationalism add layers of complexity to the understanding of desh-bidesh. The ongoing debates about citizenship, identity, and belonging in the context of Bangladesh's changing political landscape have significant implications for the paradigm of desh-bidesh (Said, 1978).

The desh-bidesh paradigm remains highly relevant in contemporary research on migration, identity, and transnationalism. It provides a lens through which to explore the complex ways in which migrants navigate their identities across different cultural and geographical spaces. In an increasingly globalised world, where migration is a common experience, the desh-bidesh paradigm offers valuable insights into the ways in which individuals and communities construct and maintain their identities in the face of multiple, often conflicting, influences. Moreover, the paradigm highlights the ongoing importance of cultural and familial ties in the lives of migrants, even as they integrate into new societies.

This perspective is crucial for understanding the persistence of cultural practices and values among diaspora communities, as well as the ways in which these practices evolve over time. As such, the desh-bidesh paradigm is not only a framework for understanding the experiences of the Sylheti Bengali community but also a broader tool for analysing the dynamics of migration and identity in a globalised world.

The desh-bidesh paradigm provides a powerful framework for understanding the complex experiences of the Sylheti Bengali diaspora and, by extension, other migrant communities. By capturing the duality of living between desh and bidesh, the paradigm sheds light on the ways in which migrants negotiate their identities and maintain connections to their cultural roots while adapting to life in a foreign land. As migration continues to shape the modern world, the desh-bidesh paradigm remains a vital tool for exploring the intersections of identity, belonging, and transnationalism.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Prologue

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a comprehensive overview of the key theoretical and empirical research informing the study of identity formation and belonging among British Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage in Tower Hamlets, East London. Identity and belonging are complex, multifaceted constructs influenced by social, cultural, political, and historical factors. This chapter sets the foundation for understanding these dynamics by examining relevant theories and previous studies addressing similar issues.

The review begins by outlining the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study, including key concepts related to identity and belonging. It discusses the specific context of Muslim identity formation, particularly the intersections of Islam with cultural and national identities in Britain, and considers significant socio-political events, notably post-9/11 and 7/7, in relation to their impact on Muslim identities. Additionally, the review addresses the generational and gendered dimensions of identity within migrant communities, exploring the distinct challenges faced across generations and between genders. A central focus is the desh-bidesh paradigm, which offers critical insight into the identity dynamics of the Sylheti Bengali community. This paradigm is explored in depth, alongside gaps in the existing literature that highlight the need for further research specifically addressing the Sylheti diaspora. Through this, the review not only establishes a foundation for the current study but also situates it within broader academic discourses on migration, identity, belonging, and transnationalism.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks on Identity and Belonging

The study of identity and belonging is a multidisciplinary field, drawing on sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and anthropology. This section explores key theoretical frameworks that inform the understanding of identity formation, maintenance, and negotiation, particularly within migrant communities. By critically examining these frameworks and incorporating recent scholarship, a better understanding emerges of the complex processes shaping the identities of British-born Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage.

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, remains foundational for explaining identity formation. SIT posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups defined by ethnicity, religion, nationality, or gender, fostering distinctions between in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For the Sylheti Bengali community in Tower Hamlets, identity is shaped through ethnicity, religion, and migration history. SIT helps explain how individuals balance cultural heritage with the pressures of assimilation. The concept of in-group solidarity becomes especially relevant in the post-9/11 and 7/7 socio-political climate, where Islamophobia and securitisation have intensified perceptions of exclusion and "otherness" (Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009; Abbas, 2021) thus religious identity—particularly Islam—emerged as a central axis of group solidarity and resistance, especially among young women who use religious symbols like the hijab to assert agency (Tarlo, 2010; Ali, 2022).

While SIT highlights the role of group membership in identity construction, it has been critiqued for oversimplifying identities as static and for insufficiently considering intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Scholars such as Modood (2019) and Gholami (2017) argue that external power structures like racism, Islamophobia, and patriarchy significantly impact minority identity formation. Intersectionality provides a lens to explore how multiple identities overlap, showing how race, gender, ethnicity, and religion combine to create compounded systems of

exclusion. Research by Ali (2022) and Begum (2024) shows that British Muslim women resist both Western and intra-community expectations, using cultural and religious practices strategically for empowerment. The hijab, for instance, becomes simultaneously a religious commitment, a feminist assertion, and a counter-narrative to stereotypes. However, intersectionality has also been critiqued for its abstraction, occasionally losing sight of specific local contexts (Yuval-Davis, 2011). This critique underscores the importance of combining intersectionality with context-specific approaches, such as auto-ethnography, to foreground the voices and experiences of marginalised groups.

Symbolic Interactionism, a sociological framework introduced by George Herbert Mead and later expanded by Herbert Blumer (1969), posits that identity is not a fixed or innate construct but is continuously shaped and reshaped through social interactions. It emphasises the dynamic nature of identity formation, focusing on the meanings individuals attach to interactions and the symbols they encounter.

This theory is especially pertinent when exploring the identities of British-born Sylheti Bengali Muslims, who exist at the intersection of multiple cultural, religious, and societal influences. Symbolic Interactionism asserts that the self is formed and reformed through ongoing interactions within social contexts. For Sylheti Bengali Muslims, identity construction involves navigating multiple layers of meaning derived from their cultural heritage, religious practices, and experiences in a multicultural British society. For example, a young Sylheti Muslim might experience identity negotiation when wearing a hijab or speaking a mix of Sylheti and English. These actions carry symbolic meanings within their immediate community (where they signify adherence to cultural and religious norms) and within the broader British society (where they may be seen as markers of difference or, conversely, cultural integration). This dynamic negotiation of identity aligns with Erving Goffman's (1959) concept of "impression management," wherein individuals present themselves differently in various social contexts to align with expectations or resist stereotypes. This might involve emphasising certain aspects of their identity, such as Britishness, in professional or educational settings, while prioritising cultural and religious values within their families or communities.

Within the Sylheti Bengali community, social interactions play a crucial role in maintaining cultural identity and communal belonging. For instance, participation in family functions, religious gatherings, community events, and family functions reinforces cultural practices and norms. These interactions serve as a space for younger generations to learn about their heritage while also negotiating the pressures of conformity. For example, a Sylheti teenager might navigate expectations to observe Islamic rituals while also engaging with British cultural practices, such as attending school proms. These interactions are not passive; rather, they are sites of active meaning-making where younger Sylheti's make choices about which aspects of their heritage to retain, reinterpret, or discard. Symbolic Interactionism helps to explain how these interactions contribute to a fluid and evolving sense of identity, as individuals respond to the expectations and reactions of those around them.

British-born Sylheti Muslims often encounter conflicting expectations regarding their faith. Within their families and communities, religious observance might be emphasised as a core marker of identity, encompassing practices such as daily prayers, halal dietary restrictions, and participation in Ramadan. However, in broader British society, these practices may be misunderstood or subject to stereotypes, such as the perception of Muslims as monolithic or incompatible with British values (Said, 1978). Social interactions in schools, workplaces, and public spaces often shape how Sylheti Muslims understand and express their religious identities. For example, a young Sylheti woman wearing a hijab might receive questions or

comments from peers, requiring her to explain or defend her choice. These interactions not only shape her understanding of how others perceive her but also influence her sense of self and belonging. Goffman's (1959) framework is particularly useful here, as it sheds light on how Sylheti Muslims may engage in impression management to navigate both religious and cultural stereotypes. For Sylheti Bengali Muslims, particularly the younger generation, identity formation often involves balancing dual expectations.

On one hand, their community may encourage adherence to traditional Sylheti customs, religious practices, and collective values. On the other hand, broader British society may expect assimilation into secular and individualistic norms. Symbolic Interactionism provides a lens to explore how these dual pressures create tensions and opportunities for hybrid identity formation. For instance, young Sylheti Muslims might navigate this balancing act by selectively engaging in cultural practices that align with their values while adapting others to fit their social environments. A common example is language use: speaking Sylheti at home to maintain familial ties while using English with friends and colleagues to integrate into broader society. These adaptations highlight the fluidity of identity and the active role individuals play in shaping their self-concept through social interactions.

While Symbolic Interactionism offers valuable insights into identity formation, it has limitations when applied to the experiences of Sylheti Bengali Muslims. The theory focuses primarily on micro-level interactions and may overlook structural factors, such as systemic racism, Islamophobia, and socio-economic inequalities, that shape the context in which these interactions occur. For instance, while a young Sylheti Muslim may navigate stereotypes in their workplace using impression management, their opportunities for advancement may still be constrained by broader institutional biases (Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009). Additionally, Symbolic Interactionism does not fully address power dynamics inherent in social interactions.

For Sylheti Muslims, interactions with institutions such as schools, law enforcement, or the media often involve unequal power relations that can significantly impact their identity formation. These structural factors interact with social dynamics, creating complex layers of influence that require broader theoretical frameworks, such as Critical Race Theory or Postcolonialism, to fully understand. Symbolic Interactionism provides a powerful framework for understanding the fluid and context-dependent nature of identity among Sylheti Bengali Muslims. By focusing on social interactions and the meanings individuals attach to them, the theory highlights the active role individuals play in constructing their identities within a multicultural society.

However, the framework must be complemented by broader analyses of structural and systemic factors to fully capture the complexities of identity negotiation in diasporic and minority communities. This perspective is particularly valuable for examining the lived experiences of British-born Sylheti Muslims, who continuously navigate cultural and religious expectations in dynamic social environments. Through their interactions within both their community and British society, they construct hybrid identities that reflect resilience, adaptability, and agency. These processes underscore the importance of context and social meaning in shaping the evolving self.

Postcolonial theories, particularly those of Homi Bhabha (1994), offer critical insights into the processes of identity formation among migrant communities. Bhabha's concept of hybridity explains how individuals navigate cultural "in-betweenness, " forging new identities that merge elements of their heritage with the realities of life in a host society. This hybridity is particularly evident in the desh-bidesh paradigm, which remains deeply relevant to the Sylheti Bengali

community across generations (Gardner, 1995; Hoque, 2011). For the first generation of migrants, desh-bidesh represented a tangible connection to Bangladesh, often maintained through remittances, periodic visits, and the preservation of cultural practices (Adams, 1987; Eade & Garbin, 2006). However, for younger generations, desh-bidesh has evolved into a more symbolic construct, representing heritage and identity negotiation rather than a direct lived connection (Rajina, 2018; Begum, 2024). Research by Rajina (2018) highlights how young Sylheti Bengali women utilise cultural markers such as language, clothing, and religious practices to navigate their identities within the desh-bidesh framework. Yet, as Modood (2019) critiques, this hybrid identity often involves negotiating conflicting pressures: the desire to belong to Britain, adherence to cultural traditions, and resistance against external stereotyping.

Cultural hybridity, as popularised by Bhabha (1994), refers to the process by which individuals blend elements from different cultures to create new, hybrid identities. For British-born Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage, this hybridity reflects the intersection of Sylheti traditions, Islamic practices, and British cultural norms. Bhabha's idea of the "third space" captures this dynamic, highlighting a conceptual arena where new identities are created through cultural negotiation. Hoque's (2015) research on "Br-Islamic" identity among British Bangladeshi youth underscores this hybridity. Young Muslims actively blend Britishness with their religious and ethnic identities as a form of resilience and self-expression. Similarly, Rajina (2018) illustrates how Sylheti women in East London employ practices such as dress and language to assert their hybrid identities while managing societal and community expectations. For instance, language plays a central role in hybrid identity formation.

The younger generation often combines English and Sylheti Bengali in everyday conversations, reflecting their ability to navigate multiple cultural worlds (Blommaert, 2010). In some cases, this linguistic blending extends to the development of new dialects, such as Multicultural London English (MLE), which incorporates elements of English, South Asian languages, and other diasporic influences (Rampton, 2011). These innovations create shared identities that transcend traditional ethnic or cultural boundaries.
Fashion is another significant site of hybridity.

Among British Sylheti Bengali women, clothing choices often blend traditional South Asian attire with Western styles. For instance, young women may pair hijabs with jeans or modern dresses, a sartorial adaptation that affirms religious identity, expresses individuality, and asserts membership in both British and Bangladeshi cultural spheres (Afshar, 2008). These choices often serve as a form of resistance, challenging societal norms and stereotypes while celebrating cultural pride. Incorporating Western elements into traditional attire further demonstrates the fluid and dynamic nature of identity in migrant communities (Bhabha, 1994).

The negotiation of identity also extends to religious practices. Many British-born Sylheti Muslims integrate British traditions, such as celebrating Birthdays or/and public holidays like Christmas, into their own cultural framework while maintaining Islamic values (Yuval-Davis, 2006). These adaptations reflect the flexibility of cultural and religious norms in diasporic contexts. Hybrid religious practices foster a sense of belonging to both the global Muslim Ummah and British society. For example, interfaith dialogue initiatives allow young Muslims to articulate their faith in ways that resonate with broader British values of inclusivity and mutual respect (Poole, 2002).

Food serves as both a link to heritage and a medium for identity negotiation in multicultural contexts. Food practices exemplify hybridity through the adaptation of traditional recipes and the creation of fusion cuisines. Diasporic households often adapt traditional dishes to the ingredients available in their host country. For example, Sylheti families might prepare shutki

(fermented dried fish) using locally sourced fish or substitute spices to cater to British tastes. These adaptations are not merely practical but also creative, reflecting the hybrid identities of the cooks. Such dishes retain the essence of the homeland while incorporating the realities of life in Britain, symbolising dual belonging (Blumer, 1969). Fusion cuisines demonstrate how food becomes a medium for cultural exchange and economic opportunity. In Sylheti-owned restaurants, dishes like satkora (akin to a lime, originating from Sylhet, Bangladesh) donners, Naga (a hot Bengali chilli) spicy wings, spicy chicken tikka burgers etc to cater to British tastes while maintaining South Asian flavours (Said, 1978). Many of these establishments, particularly in Tower Hamlets, have played a pivotal role in popularising South Asian cuisine across Britain, fostering intercultural dialogue and shaping public perceptions of cultural identity (Poole, 2002).

Food practices are deeply tied to cultural memory and belonging. Preparing and consuming traditional dishes allows Sylheti Bengalis to maintain a connection to desh, evoking memories of family gatherings, festivals, and rituals in Bangladesh. Shared meals also reinforce communal bonds within the diaspora, providing continuity and solidarity (Vertovec, 2009). However, younger generations may gradually lose traditional culinary knowledge as they adopt more British food habits, highlighting the generational complexities of cultural transmission (Phillips, 2008).

While hybridity offers a valuable framework for understanding identity negotiation, it is not without tensions. Individuals often face conflicting pressures, such as managing community expectations of cultural "authenticity" while navigating external demands for assimilation. For instance, Hoque (2015) highlights how young British Muslims are sometimes criticised within their communities for being too "Westernized" or insufficiently "authentic." Furthermore, Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity has been critiqued for romanticising cultural blending while underplaying structural inequalities. Gholami (2017) and Modood (2019) argue that hybridity often assumes an equitable exchange of cultural elements, ignoring how dominant societal structures, such as systemic racism and Islamophobia, limit the agency of marginalized communities.

For British-born Sylheti Muslims, identity construction is frequently constrained by socio-political factors like xenophobia and economic marginalization (Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009; Abbas, 2021). Cultural hybridity provides a nuanced lens to understand the dynamic identities of British Sylheti Bengali Muslims. Manifesting in language, fashion, social customs, and food practices, hybridity reflects both the resilience and adaptability of diasporic communities. However, it also underscores the challenges of navigating cultural specificity in a globalised and multicultural context. By engaging critically with hybridity, this study highlights the creative and contested processes of cultural negotiation, offering insights into how Sylheti Bengalis contribute to and reshape the cultural fabric of their host society.

While Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Hybridity offer valuable perspectives, a critical approach is necessary to address their limitations. Integrating micro-social theories with analyses of systemic inequalities produces a more comprehensive understanding of how British Sylheti Muslims negotiate identity (Modood, 2019; Gholami, 2017).

By incorporating autoethnography, this study bridges the gap between theoretical discourse and lived experience. Through insider perspectives, it foregrounds how British-born Sylheti Muslims—particularly women—construct hybrid, resilient, and context-specific identities within Britain's multicultural yet Islamophobic society.

Transnationalism refers to the process by which migrants maintain active connections with their country of origin while simultaneously engaging with the host society. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc (1992) emphasise the ways migrants sustain social, economic, political, and cultural networks across national borders. These networks challenge traditional notions of migration as a linear process of assimilation, offering a dynamic framework for understanding identity formation in transnational contexts.

For the Sylheti Bengali community, transnationalism manifests through tangible practices such as remittances, frequent visits to Bangladesh, and the use of technology to sustain communication with family members. Recent studies, such as Rajina (2018), highlight how younger generations engage in "digital transnationalism," maintaining cultural and emotional ties to desh (home) through social media platforms and online communication. This contemporary form of transnationalism allows for a reimagining of desh-bidesh, as younger Sylheti Muslims can symbolically connect to their homeland while being physically rooted in Britain.

However, scholars critique transnationalism for its emphasis on mobility and connections, sometimes overlooking the challenges faced by migrants, such as economic disparities and structural inequalities (Gholami, 2017). For instance, while remittances contribute to familial and economic stability in desh, they also reinforce expectations of transnational obligations that can create pressure for individuals in bidesh. Additionally, for British-born Sylheti's, the connection to desh is often more symbolic than practical, complicating notions of transnational belonging.

Diaspora studies provide a valuable lens for understanding how migrant communities sustain cultural identity while adapting to new environments. Stuart Hall (1990) argues that identity within the diaspora is not static but is continually constructed through history, culture, and power relations. For the Sylheti Bengali community, identity is negotiated between two cultural worlds—rooted in Bangladesh yet shaped by their lived experiences in Britain. This negotiation involves the preservation of language, religion, and cultural traditions, alongside the adaptation to British societal norms. For British-born Sylheti's, diaspora identity reflects a "dual belonging" (Clifford, 1994), enabling them to engage with both cultures in ways that are dynamic and evolving. Bhattacharyya (2023) explores how this duality manifests in cultural practices such as music and storytelling, where traditions from desh are reimagined to reflect contemporary British experiences.

Similarly, Rajina (2018) demonstrates how dress, particularly the selective use of hijab and South Asian attire, becomes a marker of both cultural heritage and integration into British society. While diaspora theories offer valuable insights into the negotiation of identity, they have been critiqued for romanticising the connection to the homeland (Brah, 1996). Scholars argue that the emphasis on cultural preservation can overlook the lived struggles of diaspora communities, including experiences of racism, marginalisation, and economic precarity (Ali, 2022). For British-born Sylheti Muslims, the idea of "homeland" is often abstract, tied more to family narratives and cultural imagination than to personal experience. This symbolic connection can create feelings of alienation, as they may feel neither fully British nor entirely connected to Bangladesh.

The negotiation of Muslim identity in a non-Muslim society presents unique challenges, particularly in the context of migration and generational change. For many, Islam provides a moral and cultural framework that guides everyday life and preserves a connection to desh (Werbner, 2005). This role of religion becomes even more significant for younger generations

growing up in Britain, where Islam serves as a means of resistance and resilience in the face of cultural and societal pressures (Hoque, 2015). However, the post-9/11 and 7/7 socio-political climate has exacerbated these challenges, as Muslim identity has been increasingly politicised and subjected to scrutiny. Abbas (2005) highlights how British Muslims face a "double bind," where they must balance their religious and cultural practices with pressures to conform to secular British norms.

This scrutiny is intensified by counter-terrorism measures, surveillance, and media portrayals that construct Muslims as a "suspect community" (Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009; Modood, 2019). For British-born Sylheti Muslim women, the hijab becomes a particularly salient site of identity negotiation. Ali (2022) and Tarlo (2010) argue that while the hijab is often misrepresented in Western discourse as a symbol of oppression, it is increasingly used by Muslim women as an assertion of agency and religious identity. Young Sylheti women, therefore, navigate the dual pressures of resisting stereotypes of Muslim femininity while managing expectations within their communities regarding modesty and cultural authenticity.

The literature on Muslim identity has been critiqued for focusing predominantly on external pressures, such as Islamophobia and securitisation, while sometimes underexploring internal community dynamics (Gholami, 2017). Scholars like Hoque (2015) and Begum (2024) emphasises that internal challenges, such as patriarchal norms and generational tensions, are equally significant in shaping identity formation. Young British-born Sylheti's often face contradictions, balancing expectations to uphold cultural traditions while asserting their autonomy in the face of gendered and generational norms. Moreover, some critics argue that the post-9/11 focus on Islamophobia risks homogenising Muslim identities, neglecting the diversity of experiences among different ethnic and cultural groups (Modood, 2019). For Sylheti Muslims, their ethnic heritage and linguistic practices distinguish their experiences from those of other British Muslim communities, requiring a more nuanced analysis that accounts for both religious and cultural specificities.

Transnationalism and diaspora theories, alongside explorations of Muslim identity, provide critical frameworks for understanding how British-born Sylheti Bengali Muslims navigate identity and belonging. While transnationalism highlights the importance of maintaining ties with desh, it must also address the economic and emotional pressures associated with transnational obligations. Diaspora theories offer insights into dual belonging but risk romanticising the homeland and underestimating structural challenges. Muslim identity discourses, meanwhile, emphasise the impact of post-9/11 Islamophobia but must incorporate internal community dynamics and ethnic diversity for a more comprehensive understanding. By critically engaging with these frameworks and incorporating up-to-date research, this study highlights the complexities of identity negotiation among British-born Sylheti Muslims, revealing the interplay between religion, culture, and socio-political realities in shaping their sense of self.

2.3. Islam, Muslims, and Identity Formation

The intersection of Islam and identity formation among Muslims, particularly in Western contexts, is a complex and multifaceted subject. This section explores how Islamic beliefs, practices, and community life shape Muslim identities, focusing specifically on British-born Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage. Recent scholarship provides insights into the roles of religion, visibility, gender, and politicisation in identity negotiation.

Islam functions both as a religious framework and a significant marker of cultural and social identity. For diasporic communities, it serves as a unifying force sustaining cultural continuity across generations (Esposito, 2011). Among British-born Sylheti Muslims, Islam provides not

only a moral and ethical foundation but also a crucial component of diasporic identity. Daily practices such as prayer, fasting during Ramadan, and participation in religious festivals reinforce connections to the global Muslim *ummah* while distinguishing Muslims from wider British society. Practising Islam in a Western context often becomes a site of contestation. Rajina (2018) notes how British-born Sylheti women reinterpret religious traditions to align with their contemporary British realities, reflecting a dynamic interplay between religious practice and modernity. While Islam serves as a unifying identity framework, scholars such as Gholami (2017) caution against reducing Muslim identity solely to religious affiliation, highlighting the intersecting roles of ethnicity, class, and generation.

Islam's visibility in Britain positions it as a key marker of difference. Expressions such as the hijab can foster solidarity within Muslim communities but also trigger discrimination. Modood (2005) highlights that post-9/11 and 7/7, Muslim visibility has been associated with negative stereotypes framing Muslims as oppositional to British values. British-born Sylheti Muslims, particularly women who wear the hijab, face alienation and hypervisibility, complicating their sense of belonging (Abbas, 2021; Ali, 2022).

Recent research underlines that many young Muslims respond by asserting their religious identities more strongly, using them as acts of resistance and self-affirmation. For Sylheti women, the hijab becomes not only a religious symbol but also a political statement of resilience against Islamophobia (Ali, 2022; Tarlo, 2010). However, scholars caution that focusing exclusively on visibility risks reducing Muslim identity to reactive self-presentation. Begum (2024) emphasises that British Muslims also engage in activism, cultural production, and positive self-representation, demonstrating agency beyond mere resistance.

Family structures play a central role in transmitting Islamic values. In Sylheti households, intergenerational dynamics often involve negotiation, as younger Muslims adapt religious practices to their British context. Rumbaut (2004) discusses how adaptations sometimes create tensions with older generations, who prioritise traditional observance and ties to desh. Here, the desh-bidesh dynamic influences not only cultural identity but also religious expression. Community spaces such as mosques and cultural centres reinforce Islamic identity but are also sites of contestation, where different interpretations of Islam, cultural expectations, and generational divides emerge (Peach & Gale, 2003). This pluralism challenges monolithic representations of Muslim communities.

Navigating British society requires balancing religious practices with secular norms. Meer (2010) highlights the dual pressures on British Muslims: integrating into a secular society while maintaining religious observance. These pressures are intensified for Sylheti Muslims by racialised and politicised perceptions of Islam, particularly after 9/11.
Gender shapes how Muslim identity is expressed and experienced. For Sylheti Bengali women, the hijab symbolises personal faith and public identity. Although it is often politicised in public debates (Tarlo, 2010), many women use it as a form of empowerment and agency. The post-9/11 securitisation of Muslim identities further complicated gendered experiences. Kundnani (2014) documents how Muslim women face unique intersections of racial, religious, and gendered scrutiny.

While scholarship has rightly focused on external pressures, scholars such as Gholami (2017) and Begum (2024) stress the importance of examining intra-community dynamics, such as patriarchal norms, which shape women's experiences. Furthermore, treating British Muslims as a homogeneous group risks neglecting intra-Muslim diversity. Communities like the Sylhetis bring specific linguistic, cultural, and religious heritages that influence their identity formation.

In sum, Islam serves as a central yet dynamic component of identity formation for British-born Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage. It provides a moral framework and a source of solidarity but also creates points of tension within a predominantly non-Muslim society. Negotiating identity involves balancing religious traditions with societal norms, navigating gendered expectations, and responding to politicised constructions of Muslimness. This complexity reflects the agency and resilience of Sylheti Muslims in constructing multifaceted and context-specific identities.

2.4. Post-9/11 and 7/7 Socio-Political Climate

The attacks on September 11, 2001, marked a critical turning point in global perceptions of Islam and Muslims. The subsequent "War on Terror" led by Western governments, including the UK, intensified the securitisation of Muslim communities. Abbas (2005) describes how Muslims in Britain were increasingly framed as a "suspect community," subjected to surveillance, discrimination, and heightened scrutiny. This climate of suspicion placed considerable pressure on Muslim communities, forcing individuals to negotiate their identities under conditions of marginalisation and distrust.

The London bombings of July 7, 2005 (7/7) further escalated challenges for British Muslims. With the perpetrators identified as British-born Muslims, concerns about radicalisation intensified, leading to increased public scrutiny and government interventions such as the Prevent strategy. Kundnani (2014) critiques Prevent for stigmatising entire Muslim communities and undermining social cohesion. For Sylheti Bengalis in Tower Hamlets, these developments created specific vulnerabilities. Young men, in particular, were disproportionately subjected to stop-and-search procedures and targeted surveillance (Awan, 2012), deepening feelings of alienation and distrust towards state institutions While securitisation frameworks highlight important structural inequalities, scholars such as Gholami (2017) caution against portraying Muslims solely as passive victims. Muslim communities have responded proactively, engaging in activism, community building, and interfaith initiatives to counter negative narratives and foster resilience.

The media has played a significant role in shaping public perceptions of Muslims post-9/11 and 7/7. Dominant narratives often framed Muslims as oppositional to Western values, reinforcing stereotypes of violence and incompatibility (Said, 1978; Poole, 2002). These representations contributed to pervasive experiences of "othering." Research by Ameli et al. (2007) found that negative media portrayals often prompted young Muslims to assert their religious identities more strongly, both as acts of resistance and as strategies for community affirmation.
Recent studies, such as Ali (2022) and Rajina (2018), demonstrate how British Muslim women, including Sylhetis, actively challenge mainstream stereotypes through social media, arts, and activism, promoting alternative narratives and positive representations of Muslim identities. These alternative spaces are crucial for asserting agency and disrupting dominant discourses.

The post-9/11 and 7/7 socio-political climate also fuelled a marked rise in Islamophobia. Allen (2010) documents the increase in everyday discrimination, particularly targeting visibly Muslim women wearing the hijab. Institutional measures such as Prevent further entrenched a climate of suspicion. For British-born Sylheti Muslims, Islamophobia affects access to services, public space navigation, and broader participation in British society. However, this context has also spurred intra-community solidarity. In Tower Hamlets, mosques, community organisations, and advocacy groups have played key roles in supporting resilience and resistance (Birt, 2009).

The politicisation of Muslim identity in this climate has led many Muslims to assert their religious identities more visibly. Hopkins (2009) argues that heightened scrutiny has driven

younger generations towards deeper engagement with their faith. For Sylheti women, the hijab has become a symbol of both religious commitment and political resistance (Tarlo, 2010). However, while visible identity assertion empowers individuals, scholars such as Abbas (2021) caution that it also risks reinforcing narratives that Muslims are "separate" from mainstream British society. More integrative approaches are needed, allowing Muslims to affirm their identities while promoting cross-cultural understanding and social cohesion.

In sum, the post-9/11 and 7/7 socio-political context has profoundly shaped the experiences of British-born Muslims, particularly those of Sylheti Bengali heritage. Although these events intensified challenges around belonging and public perception, they also catalysed resilience, solidarity, and proactive identity negotiations within Muslim communities. Sylheti Muslims in Tower Hamlets exemplify the dynamic ways migrant communities engage with and respond to socio-political pressures, constructing multifaceted identities that reflect both challenge and agency

2.5. Generational and Gendered Identities in Migrant Communities

The formation of identity within migrant communities is a multifaceted process, deeply influenced by both generational dynamics and gendered experiences. This section examines how identity evolves across generations within the Sylheti Bengali community in Tower Hamlets, East London, and explores the distinct challenges faced by men and women in navigating cultural, religious, and societal expectations. Recent research and critiques provide nuanced insights into these processes, highlighting the intersections of generation and gender.

Identity formation in migrant communities varies significantly across generations, shaped by distinct experiences and challenges. First-generation migrants often retain strong ties to their homeland, viewing their migration as temporary or reversible. In contrast, second and third generations, born and raised in the host country, navigate dual identities, balancing their heritage with the norms and expectations of British society (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). The first generation of Sylheti Bengali migrants primarily identifies with their homeland, desh. Their sense of belonging is rooted in the cultural, religious, and social practices of Bangladesh, often reinforced by transnational ties such as remittances and visits (Gardner, 2002).

However, the experience of displacement and marginalisation in Britain can create a strong desire to preserve their cultural identity through community networks, religious practices, and traditions. The second generation however, raised in Britain, often experiences a dual identity, navigating between the cultural expectations of their parents and the realities of British society. Ballard (1994) describes this generation as living in a state of "in-betweenness," feeling neither fully British nor entirely aligned with the cultural norms of their parents. The concept of bidesh becomes central, as they negotiate what it means to be both British and Bengali. By the third generation, there is often a greater sense of integration into British society, though ethnic and religious heritage remains significant. Phillips (2008) highlights how this generation reclaims and reinterprets aspects of their cultural identity, using them as tools for advocacy and political engagement. Young Sylhetis in this generation may emphasise multiculturalism, seeking recognition of their dual identities while challenging societal norms that marginalise them.

While generational frameworks provide a useful structure, they risk oversimplifying the complexities of identity formation. Rajina (2018) critiques the linear progression implied by these models, arguing that identity is dynamic and contingent, influenced by socio-political contexts and personal agency. For example, some third-generation Sylhetis may actively reconnect with their heritage, countering assumptions of inevitable assimilation.

Gender plays a pivotal role in shaping identity within migrant communities, as cultural expectations, religious practices, and societal roles intersect with generational differences. In the Sylheti Bengali community, traditional gender roles often influence how men and women experience migration and adaptation.

Traditional Sylheti culture defines gender roles clearly, with men typically seen as breadwinners and women as caretakers. These roles are often preserved by first-generation migrants, but the pressures of living in a new society with more fluid gender norms create tensions. Afshar (2008) highlights how these pressures lead to intergenerational and gendered conflicts, particularly as younger generations challenge traditional expectations. For women, identity formation involves balancing traditional expectations with opportunities for autonomy in British society. Dwyer (1999) explores how young Muslim women navigate these tensions, with the hijab serving as both a symbol of religious identity and a contested site of meaning. Sylheti women often face additional challenges related to mobility, education, and employment, as they navigate intersections of cultural, religious, and gendered expectations.

For men, identity formation is closely tied to their roles as providers and community leaders. However, economic challenges and societal pressures in Britain often undermine these traditional roles, leading to identity conflicts. Brah (1996) notes that these tensions can manifest as crises of masculinity, as men adapt to new norms while trying to maintain their cultural heritage. Gendered analyses often focus on women's experiences, overlooking the nuanced challenges faced by men. Gholami (2017) argues for a more intersectional approach that considers how race, class, and ethnicity intersect with gender to shape the identities of both men and women.

The interplay between generational differences and gender roles adds further complexity to identity formation. Each generation experiences gender norms differently, influenced by their upbringing, socio-political context, and degree of integration into British society. As gender norms evolve within British society, younger generations often challenge traditional roles. Yuval-Davis (1997) highlights how this can lead to intergenerational conflicts, as older generations uphold traditional expectations while younger individuals seek greater autonomy and equality.

For women, the intersection of gender and cultural identity can be both empowering and constraining. Hussain & Bagguley (2012) note that while religious and cultural identities provide strength and belonging, they can also impose limitations. Second and third-generation Sylheti Bengali women often navigate these tensions by selectively embracing aspects of their heritage that align with their aspirations for independence.

The process of identity negotiation within migrant communities involves balancing cultural preservation with adaptation to the host society. This tension is particularly evident in the Sylheti Bengali community, where generational and gendered experiences shape how individuals navigate their sense of self. Older generations often prioritise cultural preservation, emphasising language, traditions, and religious practices. In contrast, younger generations may reinterpret these elements to align with their experiences in Britain. Hall (1996) argues that identity in diasporic communities is fluid, constructed through a continuous process of negotiation.

Family and community institutions play crucial roles in shaping identity. Choudhury (2007) highlights how mosques, community centres, and family networks act as spaces for cultural

transmission and negotiation. However, these spaces can also be sites of conflict, particularly when differing views on gender roles, religious practices, or cultural norms arise.

Generational and gendered identities in migrant communities are complex and dynamic, shaped by a range of social, cultural, and historical factors. For the Sylheti Bengali community in Tower Hamlets, identity formation varies significantly across generations, with each facing unique challenges and opportunities. Gender further complicates this process, as men and women navigate distinct cultural expectations and social roles. The intersections of generation and gender create an ongoing negotiation of identity, as individuals balance the preservation of cultural heritage with the pressures and possibilities of living in a multicultural society.

2.6 The Desh-Bidesh Paradigm: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

The desh-bidesh paradigm provides a critical framework for understanding identity formation and belonging among Sylheti Bengalis. Rooted in historical migration patterns, it captures the dualities of living between Bangladesh (desh) and Britain (bidesh).

The paradigm emerged as a concept during the early migrations of Sylheti Bengalis, particularly under British colonial rule. Migration during this period was predominantly male dominated, motivated by economic opportunities abroad. Initially, migrants viewed their stays as temporary, intending to return to desh after securing financial stability (Gardner & Shukur, 1994). This conception reinforced desh as the true home and bidesh as a transient space. However, as migrants began to settle permanently—bringing families and establishing communities in areas like Tower Hamlets—the paradigm evolved. Permanent settlement demanded a renegotiation of belonging, with desh representing cultural roots and bidesh representing everyday lived realities (Adams, 1987).

For first-generation migrants, desh symbolised cultural authenticity and emotional ties, while bidesh was associated with economic survival and adaptation (Gardner, 2002). Practices such as remitting money, purchasing property in Bangladesh, and maintaining regular communication sustained strong transnational links and reinforced identity connections to desh. The second generation, born or raised in the UK, inherited narratives of desh through family memory rather than direct experience. For them, desh often became an imagined or symbolic homeland, while their identities were largely shaped within bidesh. They grappled with dualities of belonging, embodying the "in-betweenness" described by Ballard (1994).
By the third generation, desh often functions more as a symbolic cultural reference than as a literal homeland. British-born Sylhetis frequently reclaim aspects of their cultural heritage to express hybrid identities, using cultural memory as a form of resilience and community affirmation (Phillips, 2008).

However, generational frameworks should not be seen as strictly linear. Rajina (2018) emphasises that identity within the Sylheti community is continuously renegotiated, shaped by globalisation, transnational practices, and socio-political contexts.
In a globalised world, the boundaries between desh and bidesh have become increasingly blurred. Advances in communication, travel, and digital technology allow for sustained transnational engagement. For younger Sylheti's, desh may represent not just Bangladesh but also broader cultural or Islamic identities, while bidesh symbolises the socio-political realities of living in Britain (Werbner, 2002; Eade, 1997).

The desh-bidesh paradigm also intersects closely with gendered experiences. For Sylheti women, negotiating expectations tied to desh (cultural and religious roles) and bidesh (British gender norms) creates complex identity formations. Afshar (2008) notes that women adapt

cultural and religious practices to navigate new socio-political environments. Similarly, men experience tensions between preserving cultural traditions and adapting to the demands of Britain's socio-economic context. The desh-bidesh framework further aligns with theories of transnationalism. Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc (1992) highlight how migrants maintain dual engagements with both homeland and host society, challenging assumptions of full assimilation.

Practices like remittances, cultural festivals, and regular communication sustain the desh-bidesh duality across generations. However, transnationalism has been critiqued for sometimes idealising homeland connections without fully addressing structural challenges in host countries. Gholami (2017) argues that emphasising cultural retention can obscure experiences of racism, Islamophobia, and economic marginalisation that profoundly shape migrant lives in bidesh.

In the post-9/11 and 7/7 socio-political climate, the desh-bidesh paradigm has taken on new complexities. For British-born Muslims, desh may symbolise broader Islamic solidarity, while bidesh reflects the precariousness of living in societies increasingly suspicious of Islam (Kundnani, 2014). Young Sylheti Muslims, particularly women, navigate these dualities with resilience, using symbols such as the hijab as markers of both cultural pride and resistance against Islamophobia. Thus, the desh-bidesh paradigm remains a valuable analytical tool for exploring identity formation among Sylheti Bengalis. It captures the historical continuity of transnational ties, the evolving meanings of homeland and hostland across generations, and the intersections with broader socio-political dynamics. The framework highlights the complexity and adaptability of migrant identities in an increasingly interconnected yet unequal world.

2.7 Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite substantial research on British Muslim identities, significant gaps remain concerning the specific experiences of Sylheti Bengali Muslims. Existing studies often generalise South Asian Muslim communities, overlooking the unique historical, cultural, and social contexts of the Sylheti diaspora. These gaps are particularly apparent in the areas of generational identity, gendered experiences, the desh-bidesh paradigm, and community responses to post-9/11 and 7/7 socio-political challenges.

Research frequently aggregates diverse South Asian communities under broad categories, masking the distinct migration histories, linguistic heritage, and socio-economic realities of Sylheti Bengalis (Gardner, 2002). This homogenisation neglects how Sylheti cultural practices and the prominence of the desh-bidesh paradigm shape identity formation in specific ways. Rajina (2018) argues that such generalisation erases community-specific agency and nuances, calling for research that recognises Sylheti distinctiveness, particularly in areas like Tower Hamlets where the community holds a prominent cultural and political presence.

The desh-bidesh paradigm remains critically underexplored. While the experiences of first-generation migrants maintaining ties to Bangladesh have been relatively documented, limited research addresses how subsequent generations engage with and reinterpret desh-bidesh. Second-generation Sylhetis grapple with inherited expectations and lived British realities (Ballard, 1994), while third-generation Sylhetis often transform desh into a symbolic repository of cultural memory. Few studies have traced these intergenerational shifts in detail, especially within a post-9/11 context marked by heightened Islamophobia and globalised identity politics. Existing scholarship often assumes a linear model of assimilation, overlooking the complex processes through which younger generations actively reclaim, reinterpret, or resist cultural

narratives. Phillips (2008) critiques assimilationist models for underestimating the agency involved in identity negotiation.

Gendered experiences within the Sylheti Bengali community also remain under-researched. Migration literature has historically foregrounded male narratives, focusing on economic migration and leadership roles, while comparatively little attention has been paid to women's experiences of cultural negotiation, religious identity, and socio-political challenges. For Sylheti Bengali women, identity formation involves navigating intersections of gender, religion, generation, and societal discrimination. Afshar (2008) and Hussain & Bagguley (2012) highlight the ways young Muslim women balance traditional expectations with aspirations for education, employment, and autonomy.

The limited focus on women risks perpetuating patriarchal biases and marginalising their voices within academic discourse. An intersectional approach that centres gendered experiences is crucial for a fuller understanding of identity formation in the Sylheti diaspora.
Although considerable scholarship examines the post-9/11 impacts on British Muslims, there is limited research specifically addressing how these events have shaped Sylheti Bengali experiences. Most studies treat British Muslims as a homogenous group, failing to capture how localised cultural dynamics interact with broader socio-political pressures. Awan (2012) calls for a more nuanced approach that situates anti-Muslim racism and securitisation policies within specific community contexts like Tower Hamlets.

Transnationalism is another dimension that remains underexplored. Although remittances, travel, and communication are central to Sylheti identity, few studies examine how these transnational practices evolve across generations. Vertovec (2009) highlights transnationalism's role in hybrid identity formation, but little work has focused specifically on Sylheti engagement with transnational ties over time.

Similarly, while the role of media in shaping Muslim identities has been widely studied, little research explores how Sylheti Bengalis are represented or how they navigate and resist negative media portrayals. Poole (2002) warns against homogenising Muslim media experiences, underscoring the importance of localised analyses that account for specific cultural and historical contexts.

Another significant gap lies in the underutilisation of autoethnography as a methodological approach for studying Sylheti Bengali identity formation. Autoethnography, which combines personal narrative with cultural analysis, offers a powerful means of capturing the emotional and symbolic dimensions of negotiating dual identities. It foregrounds insider perspectives and challenges traditional researcher-researched hierarchies. Despite its potential, autoethnography has rarely been used to explore Sylheti Bengali experiences. Most existing research relies on external observation, missing the lived complexities of navigating desh-bidesh, gendered expectations, and socio-political challenges. Autoethnographic approaches could illuminate how cultural hybridity, Islamophobia, and intergenerational tensions are embodied and negotiated in everyday life.

In sum, addressing these gaps is crucial for producing a more comprehensive understanding of Sylheti Bengali identities in contemporary Britain. Research that foregrounds generational shifts, gendered experiences, localised socio-political contexts, and insider narratives will enrich academic discourse while amplifying the voices of an often-overlooked diaspora community.

2.8 Addressing the Gap in Literature: Contribution of This Study

This study directly addresses significant gaps identified in the existing literature by providing an in-depth, culturally specific examination of identity formation and belonging among British-born Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage in Tower Hamlets. It employs an autoethnographic approach, using personal reflection and critical engagement to explore the intersections of cultural heritage, religion, gender, and socio-political contexts.

By focusing specifically on the Sylheti Bengali community, the study moves beyond homogenising frameworks that often treat British Muslims or South Asians as a monolithic group. It recognises the distinct historical migration patterns, linguistic heritage, and socio-political experiences that differentiate Sylhetis from other South Asian and Muslim communities in the UK (Gardner, 2002; Rajina, 2018).

A key contribution of this research is its focus on and utilisation of desh-bidesh as a paradigm as a critical lens for understanding the negotiation of identities across generations. It highlights how younger generations reinterpret and reconstruct connections to desh, navigating inherited cultural expectations and the realities of British life.

The study also addresses an important gap concerning gendered experiences. It specifically foregrounds the experiences of British-born Sylheti Muslim women, exploring how gender, religion, and cultural heritage intersect with contemporary British socio-political dynamics. By adopting an intersectional framework, it captures how these identities are negotiated amid both intra-community expectations and wider societal pressures (Afshar, 2008; Begum, 2024). Crucially, the research situates these identity negotiations within the broader post-9/11 and 7/7 socio-political climate. It examines how heightened Islamophobia, securitisation policies, and negative media portrayals impact Sylheti Muslims' sense of belonging. Rather than framing the community solely through victimhood, it highlights resilience, adaptability, and proactive identity assertion (Gholami, 2017; Abbas, 2021).

The use of autoethnography as the primary methodological approach provides a distinct contribution. Through reflective engagement with personal experiences, the study captures the emotional, symbolic, and everyday dimensions of navigating desh-bidesh, cultural hybridity, and socio-political marginalisation. This insider perspective allows for a richer, more nuanced understanding of identity formation and challenges traditional researcher-researched binaries. By integrating autoethnographic reflection with critical engagement with existing literature, the study offers a holistic analysis of Sylheti Muslim identity formation. It emphasises lived experience as a valuable form of knowledge, illustrating how individuals embody, negotiate, and contest cultural, religious, and national affiliations.

Beyond academic contributions, this study provides insights valuable for policymakers, educators, and community practitioners seeking to promote social inclusion, address Islamophobia, and foster culturally sensitive engagement with British Muslim communities. In sum, the research advances theoretical, empirical, and methodological understandings of migration, identity, and belonging. It fills critical gaps by centring Sylheti Bengali experiences, highlighting gendered and generational dynamics, and demonstrating the value of autoethnography in illuminating the lived realities of negotiating life between desh and bidesh in contemporary Britain.

2.9 Epilogue

As this review of literature reveals, the experiences of Sylheti Bengalis remain understudied within broader discussions of migration, identity, and belonging. The recurring invisibility of our

stories in academic discourse resonates deeply with my own journey of negotiating life between desh and bidesh.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Prologue

Building on the reflective foundations laid in the previous chapter, this methodology chapter turns inward to explore how identity can be researched and represented through lived experience. As a British-born woman of Sylheti Bengali heritage, my own story is inseparable from the wider social, cultural, and political contexts that this study engages with. The decision to adopt an autoethnographic approach reflects not only a methodological orientation but also a political and epistemological commitment: to centre marginalised voices and to honour the complexities of navigating desh and bidesh from within.

This chapter presents the rationale for using autoethnography as the primary method of inquiry, situating it within broader methodological and theoretical debates. It explores how personal narrative functions simultaneously as data and analysis, offering a mode of meaning-making that is emotionally engaged, critically reflexive, and culturally situated. It also outlines the research design, discusses the analytical framework, and addresses the ethical considerations and limitations involved in researching one's own community—particularly in contexts shaped by Islamophobia, postcolonial memory, and gendered expectations.

The study employs critical autoethnography to explore the complex and intersecting processes of identity (re)formation among British-born Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage. This methodological approach is shaped by the need to centre voices and identities that have long been overlooked or flattened within academic discourse. The Sylheti Bengali experience is often subsumed within broader South Asian or Muslim categories, and the specific lived realities of British-born women within this group remain especially underrepresented. Autoethnography offers a means of reclaiming that space—to speak from within, rather than be spoken about from without.

Finally, this chapter positions the research within ongoing debates in the social sciences regarding reflexivity, positionality, and the legitimacy of subjective knowledge. It argues for the political and epistemological significance of centring lived experience, emotion, and personal narrative in the study of identity and belonging. Here, autoethnography becomes more than a method; it becomes a space for reassembling the fragments of identity and community—a space where desh and bidesh, private and public, memory and scholarship, converge.

3.2 Research Design

This research adopts a critical autoethnographic design, drawing on my own lived experiences, memories, emotions, and conversations to explore processes of identity (re)formation. Autoethnography, as Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) argue, is both a method and a product: it is research, writing, and story all at once.

Unlike traditional ethnography, where the researcher studies "others," autoethnography positions the researcher's own experiences as central data. In doing so, it challenges the artificial separation between researcher and researched and highlights the relational nature of knowledge production. Critical autoethnography, specifically, emphasises the political dimensions of personal experience. It situates individual narratives within broader socio-historical and structural contexts, recognising that personal stories are always embedded within relations of power (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014).

This study uses critical autoethnography to engage reflexively with my positionality as a British Muslim woman of Sylheti Bengali heritage. My memories of growing up in Tower Hamlets, my experiences of negotiating cultural, religious, and national identities, and my emotional responses to socio-political events such as 9/11 and 7/7 are treated not as isolated anecdotes but as rich, layered data that reveal broader patterns of belonging, exclusion, and resistance. The research process involved iterative cycles of memory work, critical reflection, writing, and theoretical engagement. Key moments, conversations, and experiences were documented, analysed, and interpreted in relation to existing literature on identity, diaspora, race, and religion. Throughout, attention was paid to the emotional and affective dimensions of experience, recognising that feelings of belonging, alienation, pride, shame, and hope are integral to identity formation.

By embracing vulnerability, subjectivity, and emotional resonance, this research seeks to offer a textured, situated, and politically engaged account of identity work — one that challenges dominant narratives and asserts the validity of lived experience as a form of critical knowledge.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework for this study is grounded in critical race theory, feminist theory, and diaspora studies, all of which inform the reading of autoethnographic narratives. These perspectives allow for a nuanced engagement with the ways in which race, gender, religion, migration histories, and socio-political structures intersect to shape identity formation.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a foundation for understanding how structures of racism and exclusion operate not just at the level of individual prejudice but within institutional and systemic practices (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT insists that lived experiences of racism and marginalisation are vital sources of knowledge and that narratives of those at the margins must be centred.

Feminist Theory, particularly intersectional feminism (Crenshaw, 1991), emphasises that identities are shaped through multiple, overlapping axes of power. It draws attention to the ways in which gendered expectations interact with racialisation, religious identity, and migration experiences.

Diaspora Studies contribute a conceptual vocabulary for thinking about belonging, home, memory, and transnational connections. Key ideas such as "diaspora consciousness" (Clifford, 1994) and "third space" (Bhabha, 1994) are employed to theorise the hybrid, negotiated, and sometimes contested identities that emerge among diasporic communities.

The analysis involved close, critical engagement with the autoethnographic narratives generated through memory work and reflection. Attention was paid to themes of belonging, exclusion, negotiation, resistance, and transformation. Particular focus was given to moments of tension — where different cultural, religious, or political expectations collided — as these often illuminated the complexities of identity (re)formation.

By drawing on these theoretical traditions, the analytical framework supports a critical, reflexive, and politically engaged interpretation of the narratives, highlighting the interconnectedness of personal experience and broader social structures.

3.4 Justification for Methodological Choice

The choice to employ critical autoethnography is both methodological and political. Traditional positivist approaches to research often privilege objectivity, detachment, and generalisability. Such frameworks risk marginalising the voices, experiences, and knowledges of those who exist outside dominant social locations.

Autoethnography challenges these assumptions by foregrounding subjectivity, reflexivity, and lived experience. It recognises that knowledge is always situated, partial, and produced within relations of power (Haraway, 1988). In contexts where Muslim identities are frequently misrepresented, pathologised, or rendered invisible, telling personal stories becomes a vital act of resistance and reclamation.

Furthermore, as a British Muslim woman of Sylheti Bengali heritage, I occupy an insider-outsider position. I share cultural, religious, and linguistic ties with the community under study, yet I also critically reflect on and question its norms, values, and practices. Autoethnography allows me to inhabit and interrogate this dual positionality, offering insights that might be inaccessible to an external researcher.

The political significance of autoethnography lies in its capacity to disrupt dominant narratives and to assert the validity of marginalised ways of knowing. By making visible the emotional, embodied, and affective dimensions of identity formation, it offers a richer, more nuanced account of social life — one that recognises the personal as inherently political.
Thus, autoethnography is not merely a methodological convenience but a deliberate epistemological and ethical commitment: to honour lived experience, to embrace vulnerability, and to challenge the structures that render certain voices unheard.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Autoethnographic research, particularly when engaging with personal memories, family histories, and communal experiences, raises important ethical questions. It requires careful navigation of issues related to consent, confidentiality, representation, and potential harm. Although this study primarily draws on my own experiences, those experiences are entangled with the lives of others — family members, friends, community members. Protecting their privacy and dignity is a core ethical priority.

Where specific individuals are referenced, pseudonyms are used, and identifying details are altered to protect anonymity. In cases where narratives involve others significantly, I have sought consent where appropriate or taken additional care to obscure identifying features.
I have also been attentive to the risks of overexposure. While autoethnography invites vulnerability, it also demands reflexivity about the potential consequences of self-disclosure, both personally and for others implicated in the narratives. Critical reflection guided decisions about what to include, how to frame experiences, and how to balance authenticity with ethical responsibility.

Finally, I recognise that telling my story — even with care — risks reproducing certain narratives or silences. I approach the writing with humility, acknowledging its partiality and provisionality. The aim is not to claim definitive authority but to offer situated, reflexive insights that invite further dialogue, reflection, and understanding.
This ethical stance aligns with the broader commitment of critical autoethnography to social justice, relational accountability, and the decolonisation of knowledge production.

3.6 Limitations of the Study

As with any research approach, critical autoethnography has its limitations. Chief among these is the question of generalisability. Autoethnographic research produces deeply situated, subjective accounts that may not easily translate into broad generalisations about larger populations.

However, as Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue, the value of autoethnography lies not in its capacity to generalise in the positivist sense but in its ability to evoke resonance, recognition, and emotional connection. The aim is not to claim universal applicability but to illuminate particular lived realities with depth, complexity, and nuance.
Another limitation involves the challenges of memory and retrospective interpretation. Memories are fallible, selective, and shaped by subsequent experiences. They are not static repositories of fact but dynamic reconstructions that reveal as much about present positionalities as about past events. Rather than seeing this as a flaw, the study embraces it as a feature, recognising that the ways we remember are themselves significant aspects of identity formation.

Finally, the emotional labour of critical autoethnography must be acknowledged. Engaging deeply with personal and communal histories of pain, exclusion, and struggle can be taxing and vulnerable work. Throughout the research process, strategies of self-care, reflexivity, and support were essential to sustaining the inquiry. Despite these limitations, critical autoethnography offers a powerful means of accessing affective, embodied, and relational dimensions of identity that more conventional methodologies may overlook. Its strengths — depth, richness, emotional resonance, political engagement — align with the aims and ethical commitments of this study.

3.7 Epilogue

This chapter has outlined the methodological foundations of the study, explaining the choice of critical autoethnography and situating it within broader debates about reflexivity, positionality, and the politics of knowledge production.
By centring lived experience, embracing emotional resonance, and engaging critically with structures of power, the study challenges dominant epistemological hierarchies and asserts the legitimacy of subjective, situated knowledges.

The chapter has also discussed the ethical considerations, limitations, and analytical frameworks that guide the research, demonstrating a commitment to relational accountability, reflexive rigor, and social justice.

Having established the methodological approach, the following chapters present the findings and analysis, exploring the complex, contested, and creative processes of identity formation among British-born Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage in Tower Hamlets.

This epilogue is not an ending but a quiet beginning — a transition into the personal narrative that follows. In the next chapter, I turn inward, drawing from lived experience to explore identity not only as a concept but as something embodied, felt, and continually redefined.

PART TWO

A

The Reality of Desh-Bidesh

"The soil of Bengal is not just earth; it is our identity."

Rabindranath Tagore

Chapter 4. The First Generation; From Sojourners to Settlers

4.1 Prologue

This chapter delves into the experiences of the first generation of Sylheti Bengali migrants, exploring their initial motivations for migration, the socio-economic conditions they encountered upon arrival, and the gradual shift from the mindset of temporary sojourning to permanent settlement. It examines how these early migrants navigated the complexities of life in a foreign land, balancing their cultural and religious identities with the challenges of integrating into British society.

The chapter also considers the role of the desh-bidesh paradigm in shaping their identities, highlighting how their sense of belonging was influenced by their ties to both their homeland and their new environment. Through a combination of historical analysis and personal narratives, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the first generation's journey from sojourners to settlers, setting the stage for the exploration of subsequent generations in later chapters. The migration of Sylheti Bengalis was largely driven by economic motives, with many envisioning their stay in the UK as temporary. This mindset was anchored in the "myth of return," which framed their migration as a transient phase before returning to Sylhet with sufficient savings to support their families or invest in property. However, over time, various factors prompted a shift in this narrative, leading the first generation to establish permanent roots in the UK.

4.2 Historical Background of Sylheti Migration to the UK

The migration of Sylheti Bengalis to the United Kingdom is a significant aspect of the broader history of South Asian migration to the West, characterised by distinct phases driven by socio-economic, political, and historical factors. Sylhet, a region in the northeastern part of what is now Bangladesh, has a long history of interaction with the British Empire, dating back to the 18th century. This historical relationship set the stage for the migration patterns that emerged in the 20th century.

4.2.1 Early Connections with the British Empire

The connection between Sylhet and the British Empire began during the colonial period when Sylhet was part of the Bengal Presidency under British rule. According to Adams (1987), the region's integration into the British Empire led to significant economic and social changes, including the development of tea plantations and other industries that required labour. Many Sylhetis, who were predominantly Muslim, were employed in these enterprises, establishing early economic ties with the British colonial economy. Additionally, as Gardner and Shukur (1994) point out, Sylhetis were among the earliest South Asians to serve in the British merchant navy during the 19th and early 20th centuries. These sailors, known as Serangs and lascars, played a crucial role in establishing the initial migration links between Sylhet and the UK. Although their journeys were often temporary, they laid the groundwork for future migration flows by creating networks and connections that later migrants would utilise.

The large-scale migration of Sylhetis to the UK began in the aftermath of World War II, driven by the economic opportunities available in post-war Britain. The UK, facing labour shortages due to the war and the ongoing process of rebuilding, actively encouraged immigration from its former colonies, including the Indian subcontinent. This period saw a significant influx of South Asian migrants, among whom Sylhetis were prominently represented (Ballard, 1994)

For many Sylhetis, the primary motivation for migration was economic. The region of Sylhet was marked by poverty and limited economic opportunities, prompting many young men to seek work abroad. The UK, with its demand for labour in industries such as textiles, manufacturing, and transport, offered the promise of better wages and the potential for upward mobility. These migrants, often referred to as sojourners, initially viewed their migration as temporary, intending to return to Sylhet after saving enough money to improve their families' circumstances back home (Gardner, 2002)

The migration of Sylhetis to the UK was facilitated by well-established networks of kinship and community. The concept of chain migration, where early migrants assist family members and friends in joining them abroad, was particularly prevalent among Sylhetis. These networks provided crucial support for new arrivals, helping them find employment, housing, and navigate the challenges of life in a new country. The early Sylheti migrants often settled in specific areas of the UK, particularly in East London, where they formed close-knit communities. Tower Hamlets, in particular, became a hub for Sylheti Bengalis, with the area offering both employment opportunities and a sense of communal belonging. The presence of these established communities eased the transition for new migrants, reinforcing the desh-bidesh connection as they maintained strong ties with their homeland while adapting to life in Britain (Adams, 1987)

Over time, the idea of temporary sojourning began to give way to more permanent settlement. Several factors contributed to this shift. The tightening of UK immigration laws in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 and the Immigration Act of 1971, played a significant role in this process. According to Anwar (1979), these laws restricted the entry of new migrants and encouraged those already in the UK to settle permanently rather than risk being unable to return if they left. Additionally, the economic benefits of remaining in the UK, combined with the difficulties of life in post-independence Bangladesh, led many Sylhetis to reconsider their plans to return home. Gardner and Shukur (1994) note that the establishment of family reunification policies also encouraged migrants to bring their families to the UK, further solidifying their presence in the country and transforming their identity from sojourners to settlers.

The early migration of Sylhetis to the UK has left a lasting legacy, both in the communities they established and in the ongoing connections between Sylhet and Britain. These early migrants laid the foundations for the vibrant Sylheti Bengali community that exists today, particularly in areas like Tower Hamlets. They also played a crucial role in shaping the desh-bidesh paradigm, which continues to influence the identity and sense of belonging of subsequent generations. The historical background of Sylheti migration to the UK is thus essential for understanding the experiences of the first generation of migrants and the subsequent evolution of the community. It provides the context for the complex interplay between cultural preservation and adaptation that characterises the lives of Sylheti Bengalis in Britain, setting the stage for their transition from sojourners to settlers.

4.3 Transition from Sojourners to Settlers

Initially, Sylheti Bengali migrants to the UK saw themselves as sojourners. Their primary aim was to work for a limited period, save money, and return to Sylhet to secure a better life for their families. This belief, rooted in the myth of return (Anwar, 1979), which was not just personal aspiration but a collective narrative, shaped their behaviours, including frugality, sending remittances, and maintaining strong ties to Sylhet through communication and periodic visits (Adams, 1987; Gardner, 2002). They often lived in shared accommodations, minimized expenses, and avoided full integration into British society, viewing their stay as impermanent

(Eade & Garbin, 2006). However, several factors gradually eroded the myth of return. The economic realities in Britain, coupled with the challenges of re-establishing themselves in post-independence Bangladesh, made the idea of returning less appealing. The political instability and economic struggles in Bangladesh further dissuaded many from leaving the relative stability of the UK (Gardner, 2002). Additionally, opportunities for consistent employment and higher wages in Britain provided a more secure future for their families, leading to a re-evaluation of their plans (Rajina, 2018).

Family reunification played a pivotal role in this transition. The Immigration Act of 1971, which restricted entry for Commonwealth citizens, prompted many Sylheti men to bring their families to the UK before it became more difficult or impossible (Anwar, 1979). This shift from individual sojourning to family settlement transformed their status from temporary workers to permanent residents, as their focus shifted toward establishing stable homes and investing in their children's education and futures. With the arrival of families, the Sylheti community in areas like Tower Hamlets grew and developed a collective identity. This growth was supported by the establishment of mosques, community centres, and cultural institutions that allowed Sylhetis to maintain their heritage while adapting to life in Britain (Ballard, 1994).

These institutions also provided spaces for religious and cultural practices, reinforcing a sense of belonging while facilitating social and economic integration. The transition from sojourning to settling was not without challenges. Sylheti migrants faced significant racism and discrimination, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, which often reinforced their sense of otherness in British society (Alexander, 2000). Hostile attitudes in housing, employment, and public spaces made settling in the UK difficult. Yet, these adversities also fostered solidarity within the Sylheti community, as they organized to protect their rights and assert their place in British society.

The desh-bidesh paradigm played a central role in shaping the identity and belonging of Sylheti migrants during this transition. Initially, desh represented their homeland, a place of cultural authenticity, while bidesh was seen as a temporary space for economic opportunity. However, as returning to Sylhet became less feasible, the paradigm evolved. Desh came to symbolise cultural and emotional ties rather than a physical return, while bidesh became a space for building a new life. This shift allowed Sylhetis to construct hybrid identities that blended elements of their heritage with their experiences in the UK (Gardner, 2002; Werbner, 2002). For many Sylheti migrants, the shift from sojourning to settling involved balancing cultural preservation with practical adaptation. They maintained cultural practices and Islamic traditions while engaging with broader British society. This negotiation of identity laid the groundwork for subsequent generations, who inherited both the challenges and opportunities of navigating dual identities in a multicultural context.

4.4 Identity and Belonging: How the First-Generation Conceptualised Identity and Belonging within the Desh-Bidesh Framework

The concepts of identity and belonging are central to understanding the experiences of first-generation Sylheti Bengali migrants in the United Kingdom. For these migrants, who often left their homeland with the intention of temporary economic gain, the process of establishing a new life in the UK involved complex negotiations of identity and a redefinition of what it means to belong. Upon their arrival in the UK, the identity of first-generation Sylheti Bengali migrants was deeply rooted in their connection to desh (homeland), which in this context refers to Sylhet, Bangladesh.

This connection was not just geographical but also cultural, emotional, and familial. The migrants' identities were strongly shaped by their upbringing in Sylhet, where social norms, cultural practices, and religious beliefs were integral to their sense of self. As Gardner (1995) notes, the initial framework of identity for these migrants was largely unchanged by their migration. They continued to see themselves as Sylhetis, with a primary allegiance to their homeland. This strong connection to desh was evident in their daily lives, as they maintained the Bengali language, adhered to traditional customs, and remained closely connected to their families back home through regular communication and financial remittances.

The desh-bidesh paradigm lends itself to the idea of the "myth of return," reinforcing the initial identity framework that was also characterised by a sense of transience. Many first-generation migrants viewed their stay in the UK as temporary, driven by the myth of return—the belief that they would eventually go back to Sylhet once they had achieved their economic goals. This belief reinforced their connection to desh and influenced how they interacted with British society, often limiting their integration and participation in broader societal activities. The desh-bidesh framework is a powerful conceptual tool that the first generation of Sylheti Bengali migrants used to navigate their experiences of identity and belonging as they settled in the United Kingdom.

This duality—desh representing the homeland (Sylhet, Bangladesh) and bidesh representing the foreign land (the UK)—was central to how they understood their place in the world, their cultural identity, and their sense of belonging. For the first-generation Sylheti Bengalis, identity was deeply rooted in their connection to desh. Sylhet was more than just a geographic location; it represented the core of their cultural and religious identity. This connection was maintained through language, customs, traditions, and religious practices that migrants carried with them to the UK. The homeland was seen as the source of authentic cultural identity, and this perception shaped how migrants viewed themselves and their lives in bidesh.

Sylhet, served as a cultural anchor for the first generation. It was where their values, traditions, and religious practices were formed, and it continued to inform their identity even as they lived in the UK. As Gardner (2002) explains, this cultural continuity was preserved through community practices, the use of the Sylheti dialect, and the observance of Islamic religious observances. For many, desh was idealised as a place of purity and tradition, contrasting with the perceived moral and cultural challenges of life in bidesh. In contrast, bidesh was initially viewed as a space of necessity rather than belonging. According to Ballard (1994), the UK was seen primarily as a place to earn a living, improve economic conditions, and support families back in Sylhet.

The first generation's identity in bidesh was often shaped by their roles as workers and providers, with less emphasis on integrating into the broader British society. Their identity was thus marked by a sense of temporary displacement, with the hope of eventually returning to desh. As the realities of life in the UK set in, the desh-bidesh paradigm began to evolve for the first-generation migrants. Over time, the distinction between desh and bidesh became more fluid, as migrants realised that returning to Sylhet was either impractical or undesirable due to the political and economic instability in Bangladesh and the opportunities available to their children in the UK. The first generation began to develop a sense of dual belonging, where both desh and bidesh played integral roles in their identity. As Werbner (2002) notes, while they maintained their cultural and religious ties to Sylhet, they also started to see the UK as a place where they could build a future for their families. This dual belonging did not mean a complete integration into British society, but rather a redefinition of what it meant to be Sylheti Bengali in bidesh.

As the reality of long-term settlement in the UK set in, first-generation Sylheti Bengali migrants were compelled to negotiate dual identities—one rooted in desh and the other emerging in bidesh (abroad). This negotiation was complex and often fraught with tension, as migrants sought to balance their allegiance to their cultural heritage with the demands of life in a new and different environment.

One of the key challenges in this negotiation was the cultural and social differences between Sylhet and the UK. As Eade and Garbin (2006) explain, the migrants encountered a society with different values, norms, and expectations, which often contrasted sharply with those of their homeland. For instance, the relatively secular and individualistic nature of British society posed challenges for migrants accustomed to the communal and religiously guided life in Sylhet. These differences forced migrants to navigate their identities carefully, often resulting in a duality where they maintained their Sylheti identity in private or within their community, while adopting aspects of British identity in public or work-related contexts.

The process of identity negotiation also involved adapting cultural and religious practices to fit the new context. While the migrants continued to observe Islamic practices and Bengali traditions, they often had to modify these practices to align with the realities of life in the UK. For example, religious observances such as Ramadan and Eid had to be balanced with work and school schedules, leading to a hybridisation of practices that incorporated both Sylheti and British elements. As Gardner (2002) notes, this dual identity was also reflected in the way first-generation migrants engaged with the broader British society. While they participated in the economic and social life of the UK, their primary social networks remained within the Sylheti Bengali community. This insularity was a way to preserve their cultural identity and maintain a sense of belonging to desh, even as they adapted to life in bidesh. The formation of ethnic enclaves in areas like East London provided a space where these dual identities could coexist, with the community serving as a buffer against the pressures of full assimilation.

The concept of hybridity became increasingly relevant as first-generation migrants balanced their Sylheti cultural identity with the demands and realities of life in the UK. According to Clifford (1994), this hybrid identity allowed them to navigate the complexities of belonging in a multicultural society, where they could retain their cultural heritage while also engaging with the broader British context. This process of hybridization was evident in various aspects of their lives, including language use, religious practices, and social interactions. Over time, many first-generation migrants began to develop hybrid identities that incorporated elements of both Sylheti and British culture.

As Gardner (1995) explains, this hybridization was not a simple blending of two cultures but a dynamic process of negotiation where migrants selectively integrated aspects of British life that aligned with their values while retaining their core Sylheti identity. This hybrid identity was particularly evident among the younger generation, who, while maintaining their cultural roots, also embraced aspects of British culture, such as language, education, and social norms. This process of hybridization allowed the community to evolve and adapt while preserving its cultural heritage. For many first-generation migrants, Islam provided a unifying identity that transcended the cultural differences between desh and bidesh. As Eade and Garbin (2006) discuss, the shared experience of religious observance helped to bridge the gap between their Sylheti heritage and their new lives in the UK. By grounding their identity in their faith, migrants were able to navigate the cultural challenges of bidesh while maintaining a strong sense of continuity and belonging. This religious identity also provided a moral framework that guided

their interactions with the broader society and helped them to manage the complexities of living between two worlds.

Cultural and religious practices played a crucial role in maintaining the identity of first-generation Sylheti Bengali migrants. These practices were not only a means of preserving their heritage but also a way to construct a sense of belonging in a foreign land. The maintenance of these practices reinforced the migrants' connection to desh and provided continuity in their lives, helping them to navigate the uncertainties and challenges of migration. For many first-generation migrants, Islam was a central aspect of their identity, providing a moral and spiritual framework that guided their daily lives. The establishment of mosques and religious institutions in the UK was pivotal in maintaining this aspect of their identity. As Eade and Garbin (2006) note, these institutions served as community hubs where migrants could gather for worship, celebrate religious festivals, and receive religious education. The mosque was not only a place of worship but also a space where cultural and social ties were reinforced, helping to recreate a sense of desh within bidesh. Religious practices such as daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, and the celebration of Eid were meticulously observed by the first generation, often in communal settings that mirrored those in Sylhet.

These practices helped to maintain a collective identity among the migrants, reinforcing their sense of belonging to the Muslim Ummah and to the Sylheti Bengali community. In addition to religious practices, cultural traditions and social norms from Sylhet were rigorously upheld by the first generation. These included traditional gender roles, marriage customs, and the observance of Bengali festivals. The celebration of festivals such as Pohela Boishakh (Bengali New Year) and Durga Puja, alongside Islamic festivals, was central to community life, providing a connection to Sylhet and an opportunity to pass on cultural traditions to the younger generation. As Gardner (2002) observes, the maintenance of these cultural practices was also a way to resist assimilation and preserve a distinct identity in the face of external pressures to conform to British norms.

Despite their evolving sense of identity, the first-generation migrants faced significant challenges in achieving a sense of belonging in bidesh. Despite the gradual construction of a sense of belonging in the UK, first-generation Sylheti Bengali migrants faced ongoing challenges and tensions in navigating their dual identities. These challenges were often rooted in the cultural differences between Sylhet and the UK, the pressures of assimilation, and the pervasive racism and discrimination they encountered.

One of the primary challenges for first-generation migrants was managing the cultural and social tensions that arose from living in a society with different values and norms. The relatively secular and individualistic nature of British society often clashed with the communal and religiously guided life that the migrants were accustomed to in Sylhet. Ghuman (1994) highlights how this clash was particularly evident in areas such as gender roles, parenting styles, and social behaviour, where the expectations of British society differed significantly from those of Sylhet. These cultural tensions often led to feelings of alienation and a sense of being caught between two worlds.

While the migrants sought to preserve their Sylheti identity, they also had to navigate the demands of life in the UK, leading to a constant negotiation of identity that could be both challenging and stressful. The pervasive racism and discrimination they encountered often reinforced their sense of otherness and solidified their attachment to desh. These experiences of exclusion were a key factor in the continued importance of the desh-bidesh paradigm.

The hostility and exclusion that many Sylheti Bengalis faced in the UK made it difficult for them to feel fully accepted as part of British society. Alexander (2000) discusses how this external pressure often pushed them to retreat into their own communities, where the values of desh could be preserved and reinforced. These communities became safe spaces where their cultural and religious identities could be expressed without fear of discrimination. Another significant challenge in identity negotiation was the experience of racial discrimination and prejudice.

Many Sylheti Bengali migrants faced hostility and exclusion in various aspects of their lives, from the workplace to public spaces. Eade and Garbin (2006) explain how this discrimination often reinforced their sense of being outsiders in bidesh and made it difficult to fully integrate into British society. In response, many migrants doubled down on their cultural and religious identities, viewing them as a source of strength and resilience in the face of external pressures. This response, while empowering, also contributed to the community's insularity and the perception of being separate from the broader society. Despite these challenges, first-generation Sylheti Bengali migrants employed various strategies to negotiate their identities in bidesh and maintain a sense of self and community.

In response to these challenges, the first generation placed a strong emphasis on community cohesion and solidarity. By forming close-knit communities in areas like Tower Hamlets, they were able to create a sense of belonging within bidesh that was grounded in their shared identity as Sylheti Bengalis. As Peach and Gale (2003) note, this community cohesion was crucial for maintaining their cultural and religious practices and for providing support in the face of external challenges. The role of community support and solidarity was crucial in helping migrants manage the pressures of identity negotiation. By creating and participating in tight-knit community networks, Sylheti Bengalis were able to maintain a strong sense of cultural identity while also supporting each other in their adaptation to life in the UK. Eade and Garbin (2006) emphasise how community gatherings, religious observances, and cultural celebrations provided opportunities for individuals to reaffirm their identity and find solidarity in shared experiences.

These activities not only reinforced cultural continuity but also helped to mitigate the sense of isolation that could arise from living in a foreign land. One common strategy was selective adaptation, where migrants would adapt certain aspects of their behaviour to align with British norms while maintaining core elements of their Sylheti identity. For example, while they might adopt Western-style clothing for work or public engagements, they would revert to traditional attire within the home or during cultural events. Similarly, they might use English in public settings but continue to speak Sylheti at home. This selective adaptation allowed them to navigate the demands of life in bidesh without fully compromising their cultural identity.

The desh-bidesh paradigm was not only a framework for the first-generation migrants but also a legacy that they passed on to their children. The ways in which they navigated identity and belonging influenced how subsequent generations understood their place in the world.
The first generation sought to instil in their children the values and traditions of desh, ensuring that they remained connected to their cultural heritage even as they grew up in bidesh. Gardner (2002) notes how this included teaching the Sylheti language, practicing Islamic religious observances, and participating in cultural festivals that celebrated their Sylheti identity.
However, the subsequent generations also adapted the desh-bidesh paradigm to fit their own experiences. For these younger generations, bidesh was not a temporary space but the place where they were born and raised. As Werbner (2002) explains, their identity was more rooted in the UK, even as they retained a connection to Sylhet through their families and community. This

adaptation of the desh-bidesh paradigm reflects the dynamic nature of identity and belonging across generations.

As the Sylheti Bengali community became more established in the UK, the myth of return began to erode. While the idea of returning to Sylhet remained a powerful emotional anchor for many first-generation migrants, the practicalities of such a return became increasingly untenable. Ghuman (1994) highlights how the children of these migrants, born and raised in the UK, were often less connected to Sylhet and more inclined to view the UK as their home. For these younger generations, the myth of return held little appeal, as their lives, education, and social networks were firmly rooted in the UK. The erosion of the myth of return also reflected broader changes in the identity of the first generation. While they continued to cherish their Sylheti heritage and maintain ties to their homeland, they began to see the UK as their permanent home. This shift was evident in their increased investment in property, the education of their children, and the establishment of businesses and community organisations that served their long-term interests in the UK. The myth of return, while never fully disappearing, transformed into a more symbolic connection to Sylhet—a place of origin and cultural heritage rather than a destination for resettlement. This transformation marked the final stage in the transition from sojourner to settler, as the Sylheti Bengali community fully embraced their new life in the UK while continuing to honour their roots.

The transition from sojourners to settlers and the erosion of the myth of return had profound implications for the identity and sense of belonging of the Sylheti Bengali community. This shift required a redefinition of their relationship with both desh and bidesh, as well as an adaptation of their cultural and religious practices to fit their new reality. The first generation of Sylheti Bengali migrants conceptualised their identity and belonging through the lens of the desh-bidesh paradigm, which allowed them to navigate the dualities of life in the diaspora. While desh represented their cultural and religious roots, bidesh was initially seen as a space of economic necessity. Over time, this paradigm evolved, reflecting their growing sense of duality. The challenges of racism and exclusion reinforced the importance of desh as a source of identity but also led to the development of strong community networks that provided a sense of belonging within bidesh. The desh-bidesh paradigm was not static; it was passed down to subsequent generations, who adapted it to their own experiences of identity and belonging in a multicultural society. This conceptualisation of identity and belonging among the first generation laid the foundation for the experiences of the Sylheti Bengali community in the UK, influencing how they and their descendants understand their place in both desh and bidesh.

The strategies employed by first-generation Sylheti Bengali migrants in negotiating their identities in bidesh had significant long-term implications for both their personal sense of identity and the broader community. The process of identity negotiation helped to foster a sense of resilience among first-generation migrants. By successfully navigating the challenges of bidesh while maintaining their cultural and religious identity, they developed a strong sense of self that was rooted in both their heritage and their experiences in the UK. This resilience was crucial in helping them to cope with the difficulties of migration and settlement and to pass on their cultural values to the next generation. The collective strategies of identity negotiation also contributed to the cohesion and continuity of the Sylheti Bengali community in the UK. Peach and Gale (2003) emphasise that by creating a supportive network that reinforced cultural and religious practices, the community was able to maintain its distinct identity while also adapting to the realities of life in bidesh. This cohesion has persisted across generations, with the community continuing to thrive and evolve while maintaining a strong connection to its cultural roots.

The secondary data supports the notion that the early identity of Sylheti Bengali migrants was strongly tied to the myth of return. Oral histories frequently reference the expectation of returning to Sylhet, a belief that shaped the migrants' social behaviour and economic strategies. However, as family reunification occurred and children were born and raised in the UK, the myth of return began to erode, leading to the development of a more settled identity. The critical interpretation of this data suggests that the erosion of the myth of return was not merely a practical decision but also a significant shift in identity. Ghuman (1994) notes that as the migrants' attachment to the UK strengthened, their sense of belonging evolved, incorporating elements of both Sylheti and British identity. This evolution allowed them to maintain their cultural heritage while also adapting to the social norms of their peers in the UK.

4.5 Secondary Data Analysis of Early Migrants

In exploring the experiences of the first-generation Sylheti Bengali migrants, secondary data analysis serves as a critical tool for understanding their migration patterns, identity formation, and the challenges they faced upon settling in the United Kingdom. This section examines the available secondary data sources, including historical records, previous research studies, census data, and oral histories, to provide a comprehensive picture of the early migrants' lives. Secondary data analysis involves the use of existing data collected by other researchers or institutions.

For studying Sylheti Bengali migrants, several types of secondary data have proven invaluable. Census records from the mid-20th century offer crucial insights into the demographic trends of Sylheti migrants. These records highlight the geographic distribution, employment patterns, family structures, and socio-economic status of the migrants. For instance, the census data reveals the growth of the Sylheti community in areas like Tower Hamlets, where the population concentrated over time (Office for National Statistics, 1971).

Historical documents, including immigration records and government reports, provide detailed information about the migration policies that influenced the Sylheti community's settlement in the UK. These sources also shed light on the socio-political environment of the time, which shaped the experiences of early migrants, particularly the impact of immigration acts and labour market conditions (Anwar, 1979). Earlier research studies on South Asian migration, especially those focused on the Sylheti Bengali community, are essential for understanding the broader context of migration.

These studies include qualitative interviews, ethnographic accounts, and community studies that emphasise the lived experiences of migrants, their identity negotiations, and the challenges they encountered in integrating into British society (Ballard, 1994; Gardner & Shukur, 1994). Oral histories and life narratives collected in previous research projects offer personal insights into the lives of early Sylheti migrants. These narratives reveal the emotional and psychological dimensions of migration, offering perspectives on how migrants perceived their journey, the process of settling, and their ongoing connection to desh (Adams, 1987).

The analysis of secondary data reveals several key themes that are crucial for understanding the experiences of early Sylheti Bengali migrants. The data shows that the initial wave of Sylheti migration to the UK was predominantly male, with migrants seeking economic opportunities in post-war Britain. These men often viewed their migration as temporary, driven by the need to support their families in Sylhet. Over time, as economic conditions in the UK proved favourable and immigration laws tightened, many of these migrants chose to settle permanently, bringing their families over through the process of family reunification (Gardner, 2002). The data highlights how the Sylheti Bengali community in areas like Tower Hamlets developed over time.

As more families settled in the UK, a strong sense of community emerged, characterised by shared cultural practices, religious observances, and social support networks. These communities became essential in helping migrants navigate the challenges of life in the UK while maintaining their cultural and religious identities (Ballard, 1994). Secondary data reveal that the first-generation migrants conceptualised their identity within the desh-bidesh framework. Initially, their identity was strongly tied to desh (Sylhet), with bidesh (the UK) seen as a place of economic necessity rather than belonging. However, as they settled more permanently, their identity evolved to incorporate elements of both desh and bidesh, leading to the development of dual or hybrid identities (Adams, 1987).

The analysis also underscores the significant challenges faced by early migrants, including racism, discrimination, and economic hardship. These challenges often reinforced their sense of otherness and shaped their strategies for community building and cultural preservation. The data shows how these experiences of exclusion influenced their identity and efforts to create a sense of belonging in the UK (Kundnani, 2014).

While secondary data provides valuable insights, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations, particularly from earlier periods, may lack comprehensive coverage of all aspects of the migrant experience. For example, census data may not fully capture informal economic activities, or the nuanced experiences of discrimination faced by migrants. Previous studies may reflect the biases of their time, particularly in how they interpret the experiences of migrants. For instance, earlier research may have focused more on the economic aspects of migration while underemphasising the cultural and emotional dimensions of identity and belonging.

Much of the secondary data on South Asian migration tends to generalise the experiences of different ethnic groups under broad categories. This can obscure the specific experiences of the Sylheti Bengali community, which may differ significantly from those of other South Asian groups (Werbner, 2002). Despite these limitations, secondary data analysis is essential for constructing a comprehensive understanding of the first-generation Sylheti Bengali migrants' experiences. By integrating secondary data with primary research findings, such as autoethnographic insights, this study can offer a more nuanced and holistic view of the identity and belonging of these early migrants.

The secondary data provides a broad context that frames the individual narratives and experiences explored in this research. It helps to contextualise the personal stories within larger migration trends, socio-political developments, and cultural dynamics. This approach ensures that the study is both grounded in historical reality and attentive to the personal dimensions of identity and belonging. The secondary data analysis of early Sylheti Bengali migrants offers critical insights into their migration patterns, community formation, identity construction, and the challenges they faced in the UK. This data highlights the importance of the desh-bidesh paradigm in understanding their sense of identity and belonging and underscores the complexities of their transition from sojourners to settlers. While acknowledging the limitations of secondary data, this analysis forms a vital part of the broader research framework, complementing primary research findings and enriching our understanding of the first-generation migrants' experiences.

4.6. Epilogue

This chapter has provided a comprehensive exploration of the experiences of the first-generation Sylheti Bengali migrants to the United Kingdom, focusing on their journey from sojourners to settlers, and how they conceptualised identity and belonging within the desh-bidesh framework. By analysing historical background, migration patterns, and the transition

from temporary migration to permanent settlement, this chapter has highlighted the key factors that influenced the lives of these early migrants; the transition from sojourner to settler marked a significant shift in the identity and aspirations of first-generation Sylheti Bengalis. Over time, the initial myth of return—where migrants envisioned a temporary stay in the UK before returning to Sylhet—gave way to the realities of permanent settlement. This transition required a redefinition of their relationship with both desh and bidesh, as the UK increasingly became their home, while Sylhet remained a symbolic connection to their cultural heritage

The chapter began by detailing the historical context of Sylheti migration, tracing its roots back to the colonial era and examining the economic and social motivations that drove these migrants to the UK. It then explored the transition from sojourners to settlers, emphasising the impact of family reunification, community formation, and the gradual shift in how migrants perceived their place in British society. A central theme in this chapter has been the role of the desh-bidesh paradigm in shaping the identity and sense of belonging of first-generation Sylheti Bengalis. Initially viewing bidesh as a temporary space of economic opportunity and desh as their true home, these migrants gradually developed a dual identity that reflected their connections to both their homeland and their new environment in the UK. This duality was essential in helping them navigate the complexities of cultural preservation, religious observance, and social integration.

The challenges of racism and discrimination that these migrants faced were also discussed, highlighting how these experiences shaped their identity and reinforced their reliance on community networks for support and solidarity. The chapter examined how these external pressures contributed to the strengthening of cultural and religious practices within the community, and how they influenced the intergenerational transmission of identity.

Finally, the chapter presented an analysis of secondary data, drawing on historical records, previous research studies, and oral histories to provide a well-rounded understanding of the first-generation migrants' experiences. While acknowledging the limitations of secondary data, the analysis demonstrated its value in contextualising the personal narratives and insights that are central to this research. Overall, this chapter has laid the foundation for understanding the complex and multifaceted experiences of the first-generation Sylheti Bengali migrants, providing a critical backdrop for examining the experiences of subsequent generations. The exploration of identity and belonging within the desh-bidesh framework will continue to be a central focus as the study progresses, offering valuable insights into the ongoing negotiation of identity in a multicultural and transnational context.

The First Generation: A Narrative

4.7.1. Prologue

The migration of Sylheti Bengalis to the United Kingdom, particularly from the mid-20th century onwards, represents a deeply layered narrative involving identity, memory, and the enduring connection between desh and bidesh. This migration story, embodied by first-generation migrants like my Dada (paternal grandfather), reflects the transition from sojourners—who initially sought temporary economic opportunities—to settlers who eventually established vibrant communities in areas such as Tower Hamlets in East London (Gardner, 1995). The desh-bidesh paradigm is central to understanding the experiences of this first generation.

This dual framework profoundly influenced how these migrants perceived themselves and their place in the world. Desh, imbued with cultural and emotional significance, symbolised their roots, traditions, and the homeland they left behind. In contrast, bidesh represented the challenges and opportunities of navigating life in a foreign land (Anwar, 1979). For many, the aspiration to return to desh remained powerful, shaping much of their early life in the UK—an idea encapsulated in the "myth of return" (Anwar, 1979). This belief in returning influenced their decisions and expectations, as they maintained a psychological and emotional connection to desh while adapting to life in bidesh.

However, as time passed, the practical realities of life in the UK often rendered the myth of return impractical. As Gardner (1995) notes, this led to a more complex process of identity formation, where the initial expectation of returning home evolved into a permanent settlement, thereby shaping the identities of subsequent generations. This duality, deeply felt by many families like my own, illustrates the constant negotiation between cultural heritage and the realities of life in the diaspora, producing an identity that is marked by both the pull of their Sylheti roots and the integration into their new environment (Hall, 1990).

This chapter delves into the historical context of Sylheti Bengali migration, with a particular focus on the pivotal roles played by Serangs and Lascars in the British Merchant Navy, which established early connections between Sylhet and Britain (Visram, 2002). Additionally, it explores the gendered dimensions of this migration, shedding light on the often-overlooked experiences of the women left behind in desh. By examining the desh-bidesh paradigm and the myth of return through personal narratives, historical accounts, and scholarly analyses, this discussion highlights the fluid and evolving identities of Sylheti Bengalis as they navigate life between two worlds. Ultimately, this chapter contributes to the understanding of how these experiences have enriched the multicultural tapestry of modern Britain (Bhabha, 1994).

The concept of identity, particularly within the framework of the desh-bidesh paradigm, is deeply intertwined with the experiences of first-generation migrants like my Dadda (paternal grandfather) Desh—one's homeland, in our case, Sylhet, Bangladesh—represents a place of origin, rich with cultural, social, and emotional significance, while bidesh, London, signifies the foreign land, a space of both opportunity and struggle where one seeks to forge a new life. For many Sylheti Bengalis of my Dadda's generation, their identity was inextricably linked to both desh and bidesh, creating a dual sense of belonging and, at times, inner conflict. The tension between these two worlds often shaped their personal and communal narratives, as they strived to maintain their connection to their roots while adapting to life in a new and unfamiliar and very often hostile environment.

As the eldest child of my Dada's firstborn, the moniker "Serang's Nathin" not only connected me to my familial lineage but also situated me within a cultural narrative deeply rooted in desh. This identity was imbued with the collective memory of my Dada's achievements, shaping my sense of self within the familial and social framework of Sylheti heritage. Bhabha's Third Space helps to explain this process, suggesting that the desh-bidesh paradigm I experienced was not merely a binary but a space of cultural negotiation and transformation. The "Third Space" emerges as I navigate between the cultural memory of desh, represented by my Dadda's legacy, and the lived reality of bidesh, with its distinct societal norms and expectations.

In desh, my identity was tied to the stories of my Dadda's seafaring adventures and his esteemed position as a Serang, a title that carried weight and respect within our community. These narratives were part of a collective heritage, providing a stable foundation for understanding who I was. However, upon migrating to the UK, the "Third Space" began to assert itself. In bidesh, I was compelled to reinterpret and reframe my identity in the context of a different cultural landscape. The moniker "Serang's Nathin" held little meaning outside our Bengali community, and I had to navigate new expectations, social norms, and challenges that reshaped my sense of self. This tension between the rootedness of desh and the fluidity of bidesh aligns with Bhabha's concept that identity is created in moments of cultural interaction.

The desh-bidesh paradigm, therefore, is not just a division of geography but a site where cultural hybridity is constantly negotiated. For my Dadda, the decision to settle in the UK and bring his family over marked a significant shift from the prevailing "myth of return" (Anwar, 1979), which imagined bidesh as a temporary space of economic opportunity rather than a permanent home. By choosing to establish roots in bidesh, my Dadda redefined what desh meant for our family, creating a legacy that bridged two worlds. For me, this legacy meant growing up in a "Third Space" where the boundaries between desh and bidesh blurred. I inherited the stories and cultural heritage of desh, which formed the core of my identity, but my daily life was shaped by the realities of bidesh. This hybridity was both a challenge and an opportunity, as it required me to navigate the fluid intersections of culture, heritage, and belonging. As Bhabha (1994) suggests, this process of negotiation is central to the formation of identity, transforming static notions of selfhood into dynamic and multifaceted constructs.

The desh-bidesh paradigm, as experienced through my familial and personal narrative, underscores the fluid and hybrid nature of identity. While desh provided a sense of rootedness and cultural continuity, bidesh presented opportunities for reinterpretation and adaptation. Bhabha's Third Space offers a powerful framework for understanding how these dual influences converge, creating a space where identities are not only negotiated but actively constructed. This process is emblematic of the immigrant experience, where the challenge of belonging to two worlds ultimately becomes a source of resilience and creativity.

The "myth of return" plays a pivotal role in shaping the identity dynamics of first-generation migrants. Many Sylheti migrants held onto the belief that they would eventually return to their homeland, often investing in land and property in Bangladesh with the expectation of resettling (Gardner & Shukur, 1994). However, as Anwar (1979) suggests, the reality was far more complex. Over time, the migrants' roots in bidesh deepened, making the prospect of returning to desh increasingly untenably. This unfulfilled promise of return contributed to a conflicted sense of identity, as migrants maintained emotional and cultural ties to desh while gradually integrating into life in bidesh (Gardner, 1995). The desh-bidesh paradigm's influence on identity is also evident in how first-generation migrants and their descendants navigate their relationship with both desh and bidesh. My Dadda's legacy as a Serang, a figure of resilience and integrity, became a source of pride within our family and community. This legacy shaped how we viewed

our place in British society, but also carried expectations, particularly for me as "Serang's Nathin." In desh, I was expected to uphold the family's honour, while in bidesh, I had to navigate the complex realities of being British Bangladeshi, balancing the expectations of both contexts (Bhabha, 1994).

This dual identity—rooted in desh but evolving in bidesh—is common among diasporic communities, as they manage the tension between maintaining cultural ties to desh while adapting to life in bidesh (Werbner, 2002). Rather than being a fixed sense of identity, this duality fosters a blended identity, one that reflects the influences of both worlds. For many in the diaspora, this creates a sense of belonging that is fluid and adaptable, enabling them to navigate different cultural contexts while maintaining a connection to their roots. As Hall (1990) argues, such hybridity is central to the identity of diasporic communities, as they negotiate the influences of both their homeland and their adopted country.

In essence, the desh-bidesh paradigm lends to concepts like the "myth of return," which are crucial for understanding the relationship between identity and belonging among first-generation migrants and their descendants. Migration, as both an emotional and physical journey, shapes identity in complex ways (Gardner, 1995). For those like my Dadda, and for myself as "Serang's Nathin," identity is not static but a dynamic construct influenced by the legacies of desh and the realities of bidesh, bridging two worlds.

The history of South Asian migration to Britain is deeply linked to the maritime industry, especially through the roles of Serangs and Lascars in the British Merchant Navy. As Visram (2002) highlights, these seafarers, many from Bengal, were among the first South Asians to arrive in Britain. Their journeys, shaped by colonialism and labour exploitation, laid the groundwork for subsequent waves of migration, prefiguring the challenges faced by later South Asian migrants in bidesh. Dadda was a Serang in a British Merchant ship, a 'native Boatswain' in charge of a crew of Lascars. Men like him who migrated and settled in Britain during the 1950s era are said to be the first generation and are often referred to as Sojourners.

Serangs were left in charge of recruitment of lascars, a term derived from the Persian word "lashkar," meaning soldier or sailor, and was used broadly to refer to South Asian maritime workers. Serangs, typically of Bengali origin, held supervisory positions over the Lascar crew, serving as foremen/ native Boatswain. They were in charge of recruiting Lascars and often recruited kith and kin, men from their own or neighbouring villages in the Sylhet District of Bangladesh. The British had no issues with this as they believed that a pre-existent relationship enabled harmony amongst the lascars. Serangs maintained discipline and ensured the smooth operation of the ship under the command of European officers (Balachandran, 2012). This seafaring tradition was almost exclusively male dominated and most often than not for economical purposes. Indeed, many believed that they would return back to their desh (homeland) having made themselves financially secure through savings as well as having sent money back to Bangladesh for investment in land and property (Gardner & Shukur, 1994)

The British East India Company and, later, the British Merchant Navy, relied heavily on these seafarers due to their cost-effectiveness and perceived hardiness. Lascars were employed under the Asiatic Articles of Agreement, which imposed stricter working conditions compared to their European counterparts. These agreements allowed shipowners to pay Lascars significantly lower wages, subject them to longer working hours, and provide them with fewer rights and protections (Chaudhuri, 1985). The employment of Serangs and Lascars was deeply entrenched in the exploitative structures of British colonialism.

The British shipping industry capitalised on cheap labour from colonies to maximise profits, enforcing stringent contracts and harsh working conditions (Balachandran, 2012). Lascars were often bound by restrictive agreements, limiting their mobility and access to legal protections (Sattar, 2015). Moreover, racial hierarchies were institutionalised within the maritime labour system. South Asian sailors were segregated from European crew members, provided inferior accommodations, and subjected to corporal punishment and abuse (Tabili, 1994). These discriminatory practices not only reinforced colonial domination but also sowed the seeds of early resistance and solidarity among South Asian workers.

Upon docking in British ports, many Serangs and Lascars faced unemployment, homelessness, and social exclusion. Despite these challenges, they established small but resilient communities, often centred around lodging houses, cafes, and places of worship (Evans, 1988). These enclaves served as support systems, providing mutual aid, cultural affirmation, and a sense of belonging in an otherwise hostile environment. In East London, particularly in areas like Tower Hamlets, these early settlers laid the groundwork for future migrations by facilitating employment opportunities, offering shelter, and assisting newcomers in navigating the complexities of British society (Eade, 1989). The presence of established networks made subsequent migration more feasible and attractive, contributing to the growth and consolidation of South Asian, especially Sylheti, communities in the UK.

4.7.2. Gendered migration: Keeping the home fires burning

The migration patterns from Sylhet to Britain during the mid-20th century were predominantly male-centric. Economic imperatives, combined with cultural and social norms, dictated that men would migrate first to secure financial stability before arranging for their families to join them (Gardner & Shukur, 1994). This strategy was influenced by several factors: Post-World War II Britain faced labour shortages and actively recruited workers from former colonies. Men were seen as the primary earners and thus took advantage of these opportunities to support their families back home (Carey & Shukur, 1985).

Also, traditional gender roles in Sylheti society that prescribed men as providers and women as caretakers of the household. Migration was considered a masculine endeavour, with societal expectations reinforcing this division (Kabeer, 2000). Additionally, British immigration policies during this period favouring labour migration over family reunification. Policies like the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 began to restrict entry, making it more difficult for dependents, particularly women and children, to join migrant men (Ansari, 2004).

The women who remained in desh during this period faced profound social and emotional impacts. Gardner (2006) highlights that these women, left to manage households, raise children, and care for extended family members, exhibited remarkable resilience and adaptability. In their husbands' absence, women often took on additional roles, including overseeing agricultural activities, managing finances, and making critical family decisions. According to Siddiqui (2001), this shift, while challenging traditional gender roles, also empowered women within their local contexts, though still constrained by existing patriarchal structures.

The prolonged absence of husbands often led to emotional hardships, including loneliness and societal scrutiny. Chakrabarti (2005) notes that women developed coping mechanisms, including strengthened kinship networks, participation in communal activities, and adherence to cultural and religious practices, which provided support and continuity. For these women, bidesh was a distant and abstract concept, often associated with hope for economic improvement but also with fear of cultural erosion and familial fragmentation. Gardner (1993)

asserts that tangible connections to bidesh came through letters, remittances, and occasional visits from husbands, which significantly influenced their perceptions and expectations of life abroad. From the late 1960s onwards, family reunification became more common due to changes in immigration policies and improved economic circumstances, allowing women and children to join their male relatives in Britain (Peach, 2006).

The transition to bidesh posed numerous challenges for migrant women, who had to adapt to unfamiliar social environments, confront language barriers, and often face racial discrimination and isolation. According to Salway (2007), the shift from the extended familial support systems of desh to the more nuclear family structures in bidesh intensified feelings of loneliness and cultural dislocation. In response to these challenges, migrant women played instrumental roles in forming and sustaining community organisations, cultural associations, and religious institutions. As Alexander (2000) points out, these platforms not only provided essential social support but also helped preserve cultural practices and facilitated integration into British society while maintaining vital connections to desh.

Though traditional gender roles persisted, many women entered the workforce, particularly in sectors such as textiles and services. Dale et al. (2002) note that this economic participation not only contributed to household incomes but also fostered a sense of independence and agency among migrant women. The experiences of these women also significantly shaped the upbringing and identities of their children. Basit (1997) argues that migrant women employed strategies focused on education, cultural preservation, and religious adherence to ensure the success and cohesion of the next generation within a multicultural British context.

The children and grandchildren of first-generation migrants navigate complex identity landscapes, synthesising elements from both desh and bidesh to form hybrid identities. This process involves selective adaptation and reinterpretation of cultural norms, values, and practices (Werbner, 2004). Access to education in Britain provided younger generations with opportunities for social mobility and professional advancement. However, Sharma (2010) argues that this also exposed them to divergent values and lifestyles, which required constant negotiation between parental expectations rooted in desh traditions and the influences of bidesh society.

Language plays a critical role in identity formation. Hussain (2005) observes that many second and third-generation Sylheti Bengalis are bilingual, fluent in both English and the Sylheti dialect. This linguistic versatility facilitates cultural bridging but can also lead to tensions, particularly when proficiency in the mother tongue diminishes, affecting intergenerational communication and cultural transmission. Islam remains a central component of identity for many in the Sylheti diaspora. Abbas (2005) highlights that engagement with religious institutions and practices varies across individuals, reflecting personal interpretations and levels of observance. The negotiation of religious identity often intersects with experiences of Islamophobia and racialisation in British society, influencing political consciousness and community activism.

Furthermore, younger generations express their hybrid identities through various cultural mediums, such as music, literature, and digital media. According to Alexander (2013), these expressions blend traditional elements with contemporary influences, creating new forms of cultural production that challenge and redefine notions of ethnicity and belonging.

The Sylheti Bengali community, like other South Asian groups in Britain, has encountered persistent challenges related to racism, discrimination, and social exclusion. These experiences have profoundly shaped collective identities and community responses over time.

From the early days of settlement, South Asian migrants faced overt racism, which was manifested through discriminatory policies, social hostility, and violence. Solomos (2003) highlights how events such as the race riots in the 1980s and the institutional racism revealed in inquiries like the Macpherson Report underscored the systemic nature of these issues.
In response to racism and marginalisation, Sylheti Bengalis have engaged in various forms of activism. Eade and Garbin (2006) note that the community has formed advocacy groups, participated in political processes, and organised community-led initiatives aimed at promoting equality and social justice. These efforts not only empowered the Sylheti community but also facilitated their integration into the broader socio-political landscape of Britain.

The experiences of exclusion and discrimination have also prompted critical reflections on identity and belonging among British-Sylheti individuals. For some, these challenges have reinforced connections to desh and fostered solidarity within ethnic communities. Modood (2007) argues that, for others, these struggles have catalysed the development of broader alliances across different ethnic and racial groups, leading to more inclusive and intersectional identities. This reflects a dynamic process in which Sylheti Bengalis navigate their sense of belonging in both British society and their cultural heritage.

The Sylheti diaspora has made significant contributions to the British economy across various sectors: Many Sylheti migrants established successful businesses, particularly in the hospitality industry with the proliferation of "Indian" restaurants actually run by Sylheti Bengalis. These enterprises have not only provided economic stability for families but also contributed to the cultural and culinary landscape of Britain (Brown, 2006). Also, Sylheti workers have been integral in sectors such as manufacturing, public services, and transportation. Their labour has supported Britain's post-war reconstruction and ongoing economic development, often under challenging conditions and despite barriers to employment equity (Glynn, 2014).

Furthermore, the Sylheti community has enriched British society through diverse cultural contributions: Artists, writers, and performers of Sylheti origin have contributed to the multicultural tapestry of Britain, sharing stories and perspectives that highlight diasporic experiences and promote cross-cultural understanding (Karim, 2012).

Cultural events such as Baishakhi Mela, celebrating the Bengali New Year, have become integral parts of London's cultural calendar, showcasing traditional music, dance, and cuisine, and fostering community cohesion and multicultural appreciation (Eade & Garbin, 2002).
The establishment of mosques, cultural centres, and educational institutions by the Sylheti community has provided important spaces for religious practice, cultural preservation, and social services, benefiting both the community and wider society (Choudhury, 2007).

Sylheti Bengalis have actively participated in British social and political life: Individuals from the Sylheti community have achieved significant positions in local and national politics, advocating for minority rights, social justice, and policy changes that reflect the needs and interests of diverse populations (Ali, 2013). Community-led initiatives have addressed issues such as poverty, education, housing, and health disparities. Organizations and activists have worked collaboratively with other groups to effect positive social change and promote inclusive policies (Huq, 2003).

The Sylheti diaspora has made significant contributions to the British economy across various sectors. Many Sylheti migrants have established successful businesses, particularly in the hospitality industry, with the proliferation of so-called "Indian" restaurants, which are actually

run by Bangladeshis. Brown (2006) notes that these enterprises have provided economic stability for families and contributed to the cultural and culinary landscape of Britain. In addition, Sylheti workers have been integral in sectors such as manufacturing, public services, and transportation. Glynn (2014) argues that their labour has been critical in supporting Britain's post-war reconstruction and ongoing economic development, often under challenging conditions and despite barriers to employment equity.

Furthermore, the Sylheti community has enriched British society through diverse cultural contributions. Artists, writers, and performers of Sylheti origin have significantly contributed to the multicultural tapestry of Britain, sharing stories and perspectives that highlight diasporic experiences and promote cross-cultural understanding (Karim, 2012). Cultural events such as Baishakhi Mela, which celebrates the Bengali New Year, have become integral parts of London's cultural calendar. Eade and Garbin (2002) emphasise that these events showcase traditional music, dance, and cuisine, fostering community cohesion and encouraging multicultural appreciation.

The establishment of mosques, cultural centres, and educational institutions by the Sylheti community has created important spaces for religious practice, cultural preservation, and the provision of social services, benefiting both the community and wider society (Choudhury, 2007). These institutions have become pillars of the community, ensuring that Sylheti traditions and values are maintained while also offering essential services to the broader population. Sylheti Bengalis have also actively participated in British social and political life. Individuals from the Sylheti community have achieved significant positions in both local and national politics, advocating for minority rights, social justice, and policy changes that reflect the needs of diverse populations. Ali (2013) highlights how Sylheti political leaders have championed the rights of underrepresented groups and influenced policy to address disparities in areas such as housing, health, and education. Community-led initiatives have tackled issues such as poverty, education, and health disparities. Huq (2003) discusses how Sylheti activists and organisations have worked collaboratively with other communities to effect positive social change and promote inclusive policies.

4.7.3. Epilogue

The journey from desh to bidesh undertaken by Sylheti migrants like my Dada encapsulates a rich and complex narrative of resilience, adaptation, and identity formation. The desh-bidesh paradigm serves as a powerful lens through which the multifaceted experiences of migration can be understood, highlighting the enduring connections to homeland alongside the transformative impacts of settlement in a new country.

The legacy of Serangs and Lascars underscores the historical depth of the South Asian presence in Britain and the profound contributions they made despite systemic challenges and discrimination. Subsequent generations continue to navigate and redefine their identities within this framework, contributing to the dynamic and evolving multicultural landscape of contemporary Britain. Through personal narratives, community endeavours, and collective achievements, the Sylheti diaspora exemplifies the enduring human capacity to forge meaningful lives across borders, bridging cultures and creating new forms of belonging that honour both heritage and present realities. As "Serang’s Nathin," my own story reflects this ongoing journey, intertwining the histories and futures of desh and bidesh, and illustrating the ever-evolving nature of identity within the diasporic experience.

PART TWO

B

The Conflation of Desh-Bidesh

**"I carry the weight of two worlds— one rooted in the soil of my ancestors,
the other in the concrete of this city. Both shape who I am,
but neither fully defines me."**

Jhumpa Lahiri, The Namesake

Chapter 5: The Second Generation: Family Reunifications - Envisioning Home

5.1. Prologue

The 1980s marked a critical juncture in the history of Sylheti Bengali migration to the United Kingdom, characterised by the large-scale reunification of families. This period represented a transformative demographic and social shift within the community, as men who had initially migrated alone were now joined by their wives and children. These reunifications reshaped the social fabric of the Sylheti Bengali community, prompting reconfigurations of identity, belonging, and community dynamics (Gardner, 2002; Alam & Husband, 2006).

The concept of desh (homeland) and bidesh (abroad) had traditionally been viewed as distinct by first-generation migrants. Desh symbolised a place of cultural and emotional belonging, while bidesh was seen as a space of economic opportunity, often associated with alienation and transience. However, as Eade and Garbin (2006) note, the arrival of families in the UK blurred these boundaries, leading to what can be described as the conflation of desh and bidesh. The UK, once a temporary stop, began to assume characteristics of desh, as it became a permanent home for these migrants and their families. Despite this, the cultural and emotional ties to Sylhet continued to play a significant role in shaping their identities.

As Adams (1987) notes, this period also saw significant adaptations as families re-established themselves in the UK. These adjustments led to changes in gender roles and family dynamics. Women, who had often been confined to domestic roles in Sylhet, began participating actively in the workforce and community life in the UK (Khan, 2022). These shifts challenged traditional notions of family structure and gendered expectations, contributing to a broader renegotiation of identity. For instance, Begum (2024) highlights how Sylheti women became instrumental in redefining cultural norms and creating spaces of empowerment within the diaspora. These dynamics underscored the complex interplay between cultural preservation and adaptation during this transformative era.

The conflation of desh and bidesh also had profound implications for the home as a cultural and religious space. Gardner (2002) emphasises how Sylheti families maintained their cultural and religious practices within their homes while simultaneously adapting to the socio-cultural environment of the UK. This dual role of the home as both a repository of tradition and a site of adaptation reflects Vertovec's (2009) notion of transnational spaces, where cultural identities are negotiated across multiple geographic and social contexts. Similarly, Erel (2019) argues that these practices illustrate the role of cultural capital in fostering a sense of belonging and resilience among migrant communities.

The process of family reunification not only transformed individual households but also reshaped the broader Sylheti Bengali community. As Ballard (1994) and Rajina (2018) note, the arrival of families in areas like Tower Hamlets catalysed the development of stronger community networks and institutions. These networks provided social, cultural, and religious resources that facilitated the integration of new arrivals while preserving ties to Sylhet. Community centres, mosques, and weekend Bengali language schools became key spaces where collective identity was maintained and transmitted to the next generation. At the same time, the arrival of families prompted shifts in the desh-bidesh paradigm. While first-generation migrants continued to maintain strong ties to Sylhet through periodic visits and remittances, the second generation often viewed desh more as a symbolic space than a lived reality. This

evolving perspective aligns with Stuart Hall's (1990) theory of cultural identity as a process shaped by history and context, wherein identity is continuously reconstructed through social interactions and environmental influences. This dynamic is further explored by Alexander and Knowles (2020), who describe how British Bengalis navigate the dualities of their identity by blending cultural heritage with the realities of life in the UK.

This chapter explores the impact of family reunifications on the Sylheti Bengali community during the 1980s, focusing on how the conflation of desh and bidesh reshaped identity and social structures. By examining these processes, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity formation in migrant communities and the ongoing negotiation of cultural and emotional ties between homeland and host country. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and secondary data to explore the multifaceted experiences of Sylheti Bengali families during reunification. The findings underscore the importance of understanding reunification not just as a logistical process but as a critical moment of identity negotiation and reconfiguration for migrant communities.

Overall, the reunification experiences of the Sylheti Bengali community highlight the resilience and adaptability of migrant families in the face of significant challenges and contribute to our broader understanding of the processes of identity formation and cultural adaptation in the context of migration.

5.2. Historical Context of Family Reunifications

The family reunifications of the 1980s among the Sylheti Bengali community in the United Kingdom were shaped by a complex interplay of historical, economic, and political factors. To fully understand the significance of these reunifications, it is essential to examine the broader historical context that influenced migration patterns and the policies that facilitated the eventual reunion of families.

The migration of Sylheti Bengalis to the UK began in earnest in the post-World War II period. This migration was driven primarily by economic factors, as the UK faced labour shortages in key industries such as textiles, manufacturing, and public services. The British government actively recruited workers from its former colonies, including those from the Sylhet region, which had been part of the Bengal Presidency under British rule and later became part of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) following the partition of India in 1947 (Gardner, 1995; Alam & Husband, 2006). For Sylhetis, migration offered a vital economic lifeline, particularly as economic instability in East Pakistan made livelihoods increasingly precarious.
Initially, Sylheti men migrated to the UK alone, leaving their families behind with the intention of returning home after a few years of work. These men often took up low-paying, labour-intensive jobs and lived in shared accommodations to save money, which they sent back to their families in Sylhet. This pattern of migration was characterised by a "sojourner" mentality, where the UK was seen as a temporary destination rather than a permanent home (Adams, 1987; Alexander & Knowles, 2020). However, the socio-economic realities of the UK, coupled with the challenges of returning to a politically volatile East Pakistan, began to challenge the feasibility of this mindset.

As the Sylheti Bengali community in the UK grew, so too did the networks that facilitated further migration. Chain migration became a common practice, with established migrants sponsoring the arrival of relatives and friends. These networks were pivotal in expanding the community but also created a significant gender imbalance, as the initial stages of migration were predominantly male. This imbalance led to the prolonged separation of families across continents and contributed to the socio-cultural challenges faced by the community (Gardner,

2002; Erel, 2019). The process of reunification gained momentum following the Immigration Act of 1971, which introduced stricter controls on Commonwealth immigration. This legislation created a sense of urgency among Sylheti migrants, who sought to bring their families to the UK before the window of opportunity closed (Anwar, 1979; Khan, 2022). The 1980s saw a significant influx of women and children, marking a pivotal shift in the community's demographic and social composition. The arrival of families transformed the Sylheti Bengali community from one primarily focused on individual economic gain to one centred on collective settlement and identity formation (Eade & Garbin, 2006; Alam, 2021). These historical and legislative factors laid the groundwork for the reunification of families, a process that reshaped the social and cultural dynamics of the Sylheti Bengali community. The transition from a predominantly male, sojourner community to a family-oriented, settled population marked a significant turning point, setting the stage for the development of a diasporic identity that balanced ties to desh and bidesh.

The independence of Bangladesh in 1971, following a brutal war of liberation, had profound repercussions for the Sylheti Bengali diaspora. The war caused widespread displacement, economic hardship, and social upheaval in Bangladesh, prompting many Sylhetis to seek better opportunities abroad, particularly in the UK where established migration networks already existed (Gardner, 2002; Khan, 2022). This period also coincided with significant changes in UK immigration policy, particularly the Immigration Act of 1971. This legislation marked a pivotal shift in British immigration policy, restricting primary immigration while allowing the entry of dependents of those already legally settled in the UK. For Sylheti men who had migrated to the UK in earlier waves, this policy presented an opportunity to bring their wives and children, initiating a major wave of family reunification (Eade & Garbin, 2006; Alam, 2021).

The process of family reunification was both a socio-political and personal milestone. While the policy shift aimed to stabilize immigrant communities by facilitating family cohesion, it was not without controversy. The tightening of immigration controls during the 1970s was partly a response to increasing anti-immigrant sentiment in the UK, exacerbated by economic downturns and rising unemployment (Alexander & Knowles, 2020). Politicians and sections of the media framed immigration as a threat to social cohesion and economic stability, creating a climate of hostility towards migrant communities. However, the allowance for family reunification was viewed by some policymakers as a pragmatic measure to address the social and emotional needs of migrant families and to promote integration by stabilizing the family unit (Modood, 2019). For the Sylheti Bengali community, the opportunity for family reunification marked a turning point. It transformed a predominantly male, sojourner community into a more settled population with a focus on building lives and futures in the UK. This shift not only strengthened the social fabric of the Sylheti diaspora but also reshaped its cultural and religious identity, creating a foundation for the subsequent generations of British Bengali Muslims to navigate their heritage and belonging in a multicultural society (Alam & Husband, 2006; Khan, 2022).

The 1980s marked a pivotal era for Sylheti Bengali families in the UK, as family reunification became a defining feature of the community's migration experience. The reunification process was complex and fraught with challenges. Lengthy legal and bureaucratic procedures, combined with the financial burden of arranging travel and securing housing for additional family members, placed significant strain on families. For many, the process represented both a logistical and emotional upheaval. Women and children arriving from Sylhet faced the daunting task of adapting to a completely new cultural and social environment. They had to navigate the challenges of a different climate, language barriers, and unfamiliar customs, all while often living in overcrowded and inadequate housing in inner-city areas like Tower Hamlets (Gardner,

2002; Alam, 2021). For men who had already spent years in the UK as economic migrants, the arrival of their families marked a profound transition. Life shifted from being primarily focused on economic survival and remittance-sending to one that required attention to domestic responsibilities and community integration. This transition often necessitated significant renegotiation of traditional gender roles and family dynamics. In Sylhet, traditional roles typically placed women in the domestic sphere, while men assumed the role of breadwinners. However, in the UK, these roles were often reshaped by the socio-economic realities of life in diaspora. Women increasingly participated in the workforce and community life, a change that not only altered the structure of family life but also contributed to the broader identity negotiation of the Sylheti Bengali diaspora (Alexander & Knowles, 2020; Khan, 2022).
Children, too, faced unique challenges as they adapted to new schooling systems and a multicultural environment. For many, this adjustment required balancing their parents' cultural expectations with the norms of British society. As Ballard (1994) and Alam (2021) argue, the reunification process significantly impacted intergenerational dynamics, as children often became cultural brokers for their families, navigating public institutions and translating between languages and cultural contexts.

The housing conditions many reunited families faced exacerbated these challenges. Inner-city areas like Tower Hamlets, where many Sylheti Bengalis settled, were characterised by poor-quality housing, overcrowding, and limited access to resources. These conditions placed additional pressures on families, complicating their efforts to establish a stable life in the UK. Yet, despite these difficulties, the reunification process also fostered resilience and solidarity within the Sylheti Bengali community. Families drew strength from shared cultural and religious practices, which became vital tools for maintaining their identity and fostering a sense of belonging (Eade & Garbin, 2006; Gardner, 2002).

Gender roles, in particular, were significantly impacted by the reunification process. Women, who had traditionally been confined to domestic roles in Sylhet, found themselves navigating new responsibilities and opportunities in the UK. Their increased participation in the workforce and community activities led to the redefinition of traditional norms, highlighting the adaptability of Sylheti families to their new environment (Alam & Husband, 2006). These changes also had implications for men, who had to adjust to a more collaborative approach to household responsibilities and community involvement.
Overall, the reunification process in the 1980s reshaped the Sylheti Bengali diaspora in profound ways, creating a foundation for the community's evolving identity and integration into British society. The experiences of these families highlight the complexities of migration and settlement, underscoring the interplay between cultural preservation and adaptation.

Tower Hamlets, located in East London, emerged as a primary destination for Sylheti Bengali migrants and their families, shaping the socio-cultural dynamics of the community. Historically a hub of working-class struggles, the area was characterised by economic deprivation and social tensions, which significantly impacted the newly arrived Sylheti families. During the 1980s, Tower Hamlets was grappling with high unemployment rates, deteriorating housing conditions, and underfunded public services. These challenges were exacerbated by the Thatcher government's economic policies, including cuts to social services and a reduction in public sector employment, areas where many Bangladeshi migrants had initially found work (Eade & Garbin, 2006; Alexander & Knowles, 2020). The socio-economic challenges of Tower Hamlets compounded the racial tensions and discrimination faced by the Sylheti Bengali community. The area became a hotspot for far-right activity, with groups like the National Front exploiting economic anxieties to stir up anti-immigrant sentiment. This hostile environment created additional barriers for newly arrived families, who had to navigate both economic

hardships and social hostility. Racist attacks were not uncommon, and these experiences reinforced feelings of alienation among Sylheti Bengalis, complicating their efforts to integrate into British society (Alam, 2021; Gidley, 2020).

In response to these adversities, the Sylheti Bengali community in Tower Hamlets began to develop and strengthen community institutions that offered critical support during this turbulent period. Mosques, cultural centres, and grassroots organisations played a pivotal role in addressing the immediate needs of the community. These institutions provided language classes, legal aid, and social support networks, facilitating the settlement process for newly arrived families. Beyond these practical functions, these spaces became vital for cultural preservation, offering opportunities to celebrate Sylheti traditions, maintain religious practices, and transmit cultural values to younger generations (Gardner, 2002; Alexander, 2000). The establishment of these institutions was instrumental in fostering a sense of community and continuity, helping to mitigate the cultural dislocation experienced by migrants and their families. They also became sites where the dualities of desh (home) and bidesh (abroad) could be reconciled, blending the cultural heritage of Sylhet with the realities of life in East London. This process exemplifies Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," where hybrid identities are negotiated and reimagined (Alam, 2021; Hoque, 2015).

Family reunifications in the 1980s were transformative for the Sylheti Bengali community, reshaping their identity, social structures, and community dynamics. The post-war migration patterns, the aftermath of Bangladeshi independence, changes in UK immigration policy, and the socio-economic realities of Tower Hamlets all contributed to the experiences of Sylheti Bengali families as they re-established themselves in bidesh. The blending of desh and bidesh during this period became a defining characteristic of the community's evolving identity. The UK, once viewed as a temporary destination, began to embody elements of desh, as families put down roots, built institutions, and negotiated a complex sense of belonging that integrated their heritage with their new environment (Alexander & Knowles, 2020; Gardner, 2002). Understanding the historical context of these reunifications reveals the resilience and adaptability of the Sylheti Bengali community as they navigated the challenges of migration, settlement, and integration. It also underscores the intricate interplay between cultural preservation and adaptation in shaping diasporic identities in a multicultural and often hostile socio-political landscape.

5.3. Identity Dynamics during Reunification

The family reunifications of the 1980s among the Sylheti Bengali community in the United Kingdom were not merely about the physical relocation of family members but also a transformative process of identity negotiation and reconfiguration. The arrival of women and children from Sylhet brought significant shifts in the dynamics of identity within families and the broader community, blending cultural traditions with the realities of life in a new socio-cultural environment. The reunification of families profoundly altered gender roles within the Sylheti Bengali community. Traditionally, in Sylhet, gender roles were well-defined, with men serving as breadwinners and women managing the domestic sphere and child-rearing responsibilities.

However, the socio-economic demands of life in the UK required a renegotiation of these roles. The arrival of women marked a shift in domestic and public life, as many took on additional responsibilities outside the home to support their families financially (Gardner, 1995). Economic necessity often prompted Sylheti women to join the workforce, challenging traditional patriarchal structures and gaining greater autonomy within their families and communities. Women began to participate actively in community decision-making and public life, further redefining gender norms. However, these changes were not without tension, as

some men struggled to reconcile these new realities with traditional expectations of male authority and female subservience (Alexander & Knowles, 2020). The negotiation of gender roles often became a site of conflict and adaptation, reflecting the evolving identities of Sylheti women as they balanced cultural expectations with new opportunities (Alam, 2021).

The reunification process also brought about significant generational shifts in identity formation, particularly among children who arrived in the UK during this period or were born shortly thereafter. These children often acted as cultural mediators between their parents and the broader British society, becoming fluent in both English and Sylheti. They served as translators and navigators, helping their parents manage the complexities of life in the UK. This dual role placed them at the intersection of two cultures, requiring them to balance the cultural expectations of their Sylheti heritage with the norms and values of British society (Ghuman, 1994; Alam, 2021).

For the younger generation, these experiences led to the development of hybrid identities that incorporated elements of both cultures. While they were raised within the cultural and religious traditions of their families, their exposure to British society through education, social interactions, and the media shaped their perspectives and self-perceptions. These hybrid identities often created tension between the desire to fit in with their British peers and the pressure to conform to familial and cultural expectations (Hoque, 2015). This dynamic reflects Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," where cultural negotiation produces new, hybrid identities.

The reunification process highlighted the community's efforts to maintain cultural and religious practices as a means of preserving their heritage. Homes became central spaces for cultural preservation, where Sylheti language, food, and traditions were practiced and passed down to younger generations. Community institutions such as mosques and cultural centres played a pivotal role in supporting these efforts, offering spaces for religious education, social gatherings, and the celebration of cultural and religious festivals (Eade & Garbin, 2006; Alam, 2021). At the same time, the realities of life in the UK necessitated a degree of adaptation and hybridisation. Cultural practices were often modified to fit the British context. For example, traditional Sylheti weddings were adapted to include elements of British culture, such as the use of English in ceremonies and the incorporation of Western-style attire. This blending of cultural practices exemplifies the fluid and evolving nature of identity within the Sylheti Bengali community, reflecting the duality of desh (home) and bidesh (abroad) (Gardner, 2002; Alexander & Knowles, 2020).

The negotiation of identity during reunification was also marked by acts of resistance and resilience. In the face of racism, discrimination, and social exclusion, many Sylheti Bengali families used their cultural identity as a source of strength and solidarity. Community organising and political participation allowed the community to advocate for their rights and assert their place in British society. These efforts underscore the role of cultural identity as both a tool for resistance and a means of fostering collective resilience (Gidley, 2020; Alam, 2021).
The identity dynamics that emerged during the reunification process contributed to the development of a transnational identity that continues to shape the Sylheti Bengali community. Families maintained connections to Sylhet through remittances, communication, and periodic visits, ensuring that desh remained a place of cultural and emotional significance.

At the same time, the UK became a new home, blurring the boundaries between desh and bidesh (Gardner, 2002; Hoque, 2015). This transnational identity was characterised by a fluid and flexible approach to cultural identity, allowing individuals to draw on different aspects of

their heritage depending on the context. For the younger generation, this meant switching between cultural codes and adapting their behaviour and identity to fit various social settings. The intergenerational transmission of culture ensured the preservation of Sylheti traditions while accommodating the evolving identities of the younger generation (Alam, 2021; Alexander & Knowles, 2020).

The family reunifications of the 1980s were a transformative period for the Sylheti Bengali community in the UK. The reconfiguration of gender roles, the generational shifts, and the negotiation of cultural identity resulted in the development of hybrid identities that incorporated elements of both Sylheti and British culture. These dynamics continue to influence the community, shaping the experiences of subsequent generations and offering insights into the processes of identity formation and cultural adaptation within migrant communities.

5.4 Theoretical Analysis of Identity Shifts

The identity shifts that occurred during the family reunifications of the 1980s within the Sylheti Bengali community in the United Kingdom can be understood through several theoretical frameworks. These frameworks provide valuable insights into the processes of identity formation, negotiation, and reconfiguration that emerged as families adjusted to life in a new socio-cultural context.

Diaspora studies offer a crucial lens for understanding the identity dynamics of Sylheti Bengali families during reunification. Diaspora theory emphasises the dual connection migrants maintain with their homeland (desh) and adopted country (bidesh), creating a diasporic identity that exists "in-between" multiple cultural spaces (Brah, 1996). For Sylheti Bengalis, this dual connection was not static; the process of family reunification transformed bidesh into a space of cultural preservation while maintaining emotional ties to desh. The reconfiguration of desh and bidesh illustrates the fluidity of diasporic identity, as families adapted to life in the UK while preserving cultural practices, traditions, and values from Sylhet. This dynamic process resonates with Clifford's (1994) argument that diasporic identities are continually negotiated and redefined. Memory and nostalgia played a central role, with the first generation of migrants drawing on their recollections of desh to shape cultural practices in bidesh. These memories, however, were reimagined to fit the realities of life in Britain, resulting in hybrid identities that bridged both worlds (Hall, 1990; Mand, 2020).

Transnationalism provides another theoretical framework for analysing the identity shifts of Sylheti Bengali families. Transnational theory focuses on the ways migrants maintain multiple connections across national borders, creating transnational social spaces where identities are negotiated and constructed (Vertovec, 1999; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). The process of reunification involved the creation of such transnational social spaces, characterised by the flow of people, goods, cultural practices, and information between Sylhet and the UK. These spaces facilitated the development of transnational identities that were not confined to a single nation-state but reflected the interplay between desh and bidesh (Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc, 1994).

For instance, families adapted Sylheti cultural practices to the British context while maintaining strong connections to their homeland through remittances, festivals, and periodic visits (Alam, 2021). The hybrid identities that emerged during reunification were complex and multifaceted, shaped by the blending of Sylheti and British cultural elements. This process echoes Vertovec's (2001) concept of "super-diversity," which highlights the intersection of multiple influences in shaping migrant identities. Despite the challenges of migration and settlement, Sylheti Bengalis

actively shaped their transnational identities, demonstrating resilience and agency in navigating their dual worlds (Gardner, 2002; Alam, 2021).

Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for examining the identity shifts during reunification, particularly the power dynamics and historical legacies of colonialism that shaped the Sylheti Bengali experience. Postcolonial thinkers such as Homi Bhabha (1994) emphasise the concept of hybridity, where identities are formed through the interaction and blending of different cultural influences. For Sylheti Bengalis, the reunification process necessitated negotiating hybrid identities shaped by their colonial past and present realities in the UK. These identities often embodied a sense of ambivalence, as migrants navigated the dual pressures of preserving their cultural heritage while adapting to a new socio-political environment. Bhabha's notion of the "third space" captures this dynamic, as Sylheti Bengalis created new cultural expressions that resisted assimilation while incorporating elements of British culture (Hall, 1996).

The reunification process also highlights identity as a site of resistance. Migrants resisted pressures to assimilate into British society by preserving their cultural practices and fostering strong community ties. This resistance was evident in the establishment of mosques, cultural centres, and community organisations, which served as spaces for asserting cultural and religious identities in the face of discrimination and exclusion (Eade & Garbin, 2006; Gidley, 2020). Feminist and intersectional theories provide essential insights into the ways gender and generational differences influenced identity reconfiguration during reunification. Intersectionality focuses on how overlapping social categories—such as race, class, and gender—shape individual and collective experiences (Crenshaw, 1991).

The arrival of women during reunification challenged traditional gender roles. Women who had previously been confined to domestic spaces in Sylhet found themselves navigating new responsibilities, including participating in the workforce and community activities in the UK. This shift resulted in greater autonomy and influence for women but also created tensions as families adjusted to these changes (Alexander & Knowles, 2020). Feminist perspectives highlight how these shifts redefined power dynamics within families and communities, enabling Sylheti Bengali women to assert agency while negotiating cultural expectations (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Alam, 2021).

The younger generation, who grew up in the UK or arrived as children, played a crucial role in mediating between their parents' cultural expectations and the norms of British society. Acting as cultural interpreters and translators, these children developed hybrid identities that incorporated elements of both cultures (Ghuman, 1994). However, these dynamics often led to intergenerational tensions, as parents struggled to reconcile traditional values with their children's desire for autonomy and integration into British society (Hoque, 2015).

The concept of "double consciousness" (Du Bois, 1903), which describes the experience of navigating dual identities and the simultaneous perception of self through the lens of one's own cultural heritage and the dominant societal culture, resonates deeply with the experiences of the second generation of Sylheti Bengalis. For them, this phenomenon is not merely theoretical but a lived reality, filled with moments of conflict, negotiation, and ultimately, self-discovery. Through an autoethnographic lens, I reflect on an incident involving one of my daughters during her teenage years. She had been invited to a birthday party of a school friend, an event that many might consider a routine social gathering. However, for her, it became a microcosm of her double consciousness. Before leaving the house, she asked me whether it would be appropriate to wear a salwar kameez, a traditional South Asian outfit, or if she should opt for jeans and a T-shirt to blend in with her predominantly non-South Asian peers.

This seemingly mundane question encapsulated the essence of her dual identity. On one hand, she felt a deep connection to her Bengali heritage, often expressed through clothing, language, and cultural practices. On the other hand, she was acutely aware of the cultural norms of her British peers and the potential for her traditional attire to be perceived as “different” or even exotic. Her deliberation echoed Du Bois's (1903) idea of a "double aim": the desire to remain true to one’s roots while also striving for acceptance in the wider society. At the party, she ultimately chose to wear a fusion outfit—a kurta paired with jeans—an example of navigating the "two-ness" that Du Bois describes. She later shared with me how her attire sparked curiosity among her friends, leading to questions about her cultural background. While she appreciated the opportunity to educate her peers, she also noted a subtle discomfort in being positioned as the "spokesperson" for her heritage, a role she did not always feel equipped to play.

This experience highlighted the challenges of living with double consciousness, where identity becomes both a personal journey and a public negotiation. In the safety of our home, my daughter expressed her frustration at feeling the need to constantly explain or justify her cultural choices. She asked, “Why can’t I just be me without having to pick a side or explain myself all the time?” This question, poignant and raw, underscored the emotional toll of navigating a hyphenated identity—being British Bengali-Muslim—and the longing for a space where all aspects of her identity could coexist without conflict. Reflecting on this incident, I recognize how such moments of negotiation are a recurring theme for many in her generation. Their double consciousness is shaped not only by their interactions with the dominant culture but also by the expectations of their own communities. For example, my daughter’s decision to wear a fusion outfit was not only about navigating British norms but also about maintaining a sense of respectability and pride in her Bengali identity, which she knew her family and community valued. This example illustrates how double consciousness manifests in everyday life for the second generation of Sylheti Bengalis, shaping their identity choices and sense of belonging. It also underscores the resilience required to navigate these complexities and the creative ways in which young people blend and negotiate their identities, carving out a space where they can embrace the richness of their dual heritage.

Finally, the identity shifts that occurred during reunification must be understood in relation to the role of community and collective identity. The concept of collective identity refers to the shared sense of belonging and solidarity that emerges within a group, often in response to external pressures or challenges. For the Sylheti Bengali community, the process of reunification involved the reconstitution of family and community networks that were central to the preservation of cultural identity. Community institutions, such as mosques and cultural centres, played a crucial role in supporting the collective identity of the community, providing spaces for the expression of cultural practices and the transmission of traditions across generations (Eade & Garbin, 2006).

The concept of "imagined communities," as articulated by Benedict Anderson (1983), offers a powerful lens through which to understand the collective identity of the Sylheti Bengali community during the process of reunification. Anderson’s notion emphasises that communities are "imagined" because their members, though they may never meet or know each other personally, share a sense of belonging through common symbols, narratives, and practices. For Sylheti Bengalis, this imagined community bridged the geographical and cultural divide between desh (home) and bidesh (abroad), creating a collective identity that transcended physical separation.

Through an autoethnographic lens, I recall how the concept of an imagined community often manifested during my childhood in Tower Hamlets, as my family adjusted to life after my father brought my mother and siblings to the UK. The narratives of desh—stories of lush rice fields, trees with abundant fruits, ancestral homes, and communal life in Sylhet—were a constant presence in our household. These stories were not just nostalgic recollections but active elements of identity-building, linking us to a community that spanned continents. For instance, during Eid celebrations, our home would transform into a microcosm of Sylhet. The smell of "Guror handesh" (traditional Bengali deep-fried snacks, made from a batter of flour and date molasses) being prepared, the recitation of Quranic verses, and the vibrant chatter of relatives and neighbours speaking Sylheti filled the air.

These rituals, deeply rooted in our heritage, were not merely about religious or cultural practice; they were acts of community-making, weaving a shared narrative of belonging that connected us to Sylhet and to each other in Tower Hamlets.
One specific memory stands out. During a family gathering, my uncles and aunts reminisced about the process of reunification—the sacrifices made to bring families together and the shared resilience it demanded. One uncle said, "Even though we are far from Sylhet, Sylhet is never far from us." His words encapsulated the dual reality of our imagined community: physically separated from desh but emotionally anchored to it. These stories reinforced the sense of continuity and belonging that Anderson (1983) describes, binding us together through shared symbols and narratives, even in the absence of direct interaction with those in Sylhet. At the same time, this imagined community extended to bidesh, as the Sylheti diaspora in the UK worked to maintain cultural and religious practices in the face of new challenges.

The establishment of mosques, community centres, and Bengali-language schools were all expressions of this collective identity. I remember attending weekend Bengali classes, where we learned not only the language but also about Sylheti customs and history. These classes were spaces where the imagined community was actively cultivated, ensuring that the next generation would remain connected to its roots. However, the process of creating and sustaining this imagined community was not without tension. The expectations of cultural continuity often clashed with the realities of adapting to life in the UK. For example, while my parents emphasised the importance of speaking Sylheti at home, my siblings and I often found ourselves switching to English outside the house, navigating the dual worlds of desh and bidesh.

This balancing act reflects the dynamic nature of imagined communities, which must constantly adapt to changing contexts while striving to maintain a shared sense of belonging. In reflecting on these experiences, I see how the imagined community provided a framework for navigating the complexities of migration and settlement. It offered a sense of stability and continuity amidst the upheavals of reunification, creating a collective identity that linked the cultural heritage of Sylhet with the evolving realities of life in Britain. This duality mirrors Anderson's (1983) idea that imagined communities are not static but are continually constructed and reconstructed through shared practices and narratives.

Collective identity was a cornerstone of the Sylheti Bengali community's response to racism and discrimination during the period of family reunification in the 1980s. This sense of solidarity, born out of shared cultural, religious, and social experiences, provided the foundation for collective action and community resilience. The unification of families strengthened these bonds, enabling the community to mobilise and assert their rights in the face of systemic exclusion and hostility. The solidarity within the Sylheti Bengali community can be understood through the lens of collective identity theory, which emphasizes the shared meanings, values,

and goals that unite individuals within a group (Melucci, 1995). This collective identity fostered a sense of belonging and purpose, empowering the community to challenge the dominant cultural and political structures that sought to marginalize them. For example, community members organised protests and demonstrations to combat racism and advocate for equal access to housing, education, and employment opportunities. During this period, the Sylheti Bengali community faced significant external pressures, including overt racism and discriminatory policies. Groups such as the National Front targeted South Asian communities with violence and intimidation, exploiting economic anxieties to stoke anti-immigrant sentiment. In response, the Sylheti Bengali community in areas like Tower Hamlets rallied together, using their shared identity as a means of resistance. This aligns with Gilroy's (1993) analysis of "diaspora as a site of resistance," where cultural identity becomes a political tool to confront and subvert dominant narratives.

Community institutions, such as mosques, cultural centres, and advocacy organizations, played a vital role in reinforcing collective identity and fostering resilience. These spaces provided resources and support networks that helped families navigate the challenges of settlement and integration while preserving their cultural and religious heritage (Alexander & Knowles, 2020). They also became platforms for activism, where community members could articulate their demands and work towards structural change. The collective identity of the Sylheti Bengali community was further reinforced by intergenerational solidarity. While the older generation focused on preserving cultural traditions and asserting their rights as migrants, the younger generation, often more familiar with the language and systems of British society, played an active role in mediating between their families and the broader public. This intergenerational collaboration highlighted the dynamic nature of collective identity, evolving to meet the challenges of life in diaspora (Hoque, 2015).

Resistance to racism and discrimination was not only a response to external threats but also a means of ensuring the community's survival and cohesion in a new environment. The collective actions taken by the Sylheti Bengali community during reunification exemplify the power of shared identity to galvanize social change and assert belonging in the face of adversity. This process resonates with Bhabha's (1994) concept of "hybridity," where cultural and political identities intersect to create spaces of negotiation and resistance.

The strategies employed by the Sylheti Bengali community during this period also demonstrate the agency of migrant communities in shaping their social and political realities. By leveraging their collective identity, they were able to push back against exclusionary practices and create spaces of inclusion and recognition within British society. This legacy of resistance continues to inform the experiences of subsequent generations, shaping the ways in which British Bengalis navigate questions of identity, belonging, and activism in contemporary contexts (Eade & Garbin, 2006; Alam, 2021).

The identity shifts experienced during the family reunifications of the 1980s within the Sylheti Bengali community illustrate the complex interplay of historical, cultural, and socio-political factors in shaping diasporic identities. By applying theoretical frameworks from diaspora studies, transnationalism, postcolonial theory, and intersectional feminism, we gain a nuanced understanding of how Sylheti Bengali families navigated the challenges of migration and settlement. These shifts reflect the resilience and adaptability of the community, as they negotiated hybrid identities that bridged the cultural divide between desh and bidesh, shaping their collective and individual identities in profound ways.

Theoretical analysis reveals that identity during reunification was not a static or singular construct, but a dynamic and multifaceted process shaped by the interaction of cultural, social, and political factors. The intersection of gender, generation, and community played a critical role in shaping the identities of Sylheti Bengalis, resulting in the emergence of hybrid and transnational identities that continue to evolve in response to the changing socio-cultural landscape.

5.5. Secondary Data Analysis of Reunification Experiences

The experiences of family reunification among the Sylheti Bengali community in the United Kingdom during the 1980s can be better understood through a comprehensive analysis of secondary data sources. This section examines existing data, including academic studies, government reports, oral histories, and community archives, to explore the social, cultural, and economic impacts of reunification on Sylheti Bengali families. The analysis focuses on the challenges faced during reunification, the strategies employed by families to adapt, and the long-term effects on identity and community cohesion.

To analyse these experiences, this section draws on diverse secondary data sources; Research by Gardner (2002), Alexander (2000), and recent studies by Alam (2021) and Hoque (2015) provide in-depth insights into the migration, settlement, and community dynamics of Sylheti Bengali families. These studies explore themes such as cultural identity, intergenerational dynamics, and adaptation strategies. Government publications and census data from the 1980s, as well as more recent analyses (Office for National Statistics, 2021), offer statistical information on immigration patterns, family reunification policies, housing conditions, and employment among Bangladeshi families.

These data contextualise the socio-economic environment during reunification. Collections such as the British Library's Voices of the Bangladeshi Diaspora and oral histories compiled by local organisations and library in Tower Hamlets, provide qualitative insights into the emotional and psychological aspects of family reunification, as well as the challenges of adaptation and identity negotiation. News articles and documentaries from the 1980s and more recent retrospectives capture public perceptions of the Sylheti Bengali community, as well as key events related to migration and activism in East London (Rajina, 2018). Essentially, the data reveals that Sylheti Bengali families faced multi-faceted challenges during reunification, spanning economic, social, and cultural dimensions.

The arrival of additional family members often strained financial resources. Language barriers, lack of qualifications, and racial discrimination limited employment opportunities, particularly for women. Housing conditions were another major issue, with families living in overcrowded and substandard accommodations in areas like Tower Hamlets. Government reports highlight high levels of poverty and unemployment among Bangladeshi families, exacerbating the challenges of adaptation (Alexander & Knowles, 2020; Office for National Statistics, 2021). Women faced significant challenges adapting to their new roles, often balancing traditional expectations with the demands of life in the UK. This adjustment required a delicate negotiation of gender roles within families, as women increasingly participated in the workforce and community activities (Gardner, 2002; Alam, 2021).

Children, meanwhile, faced pressures to fit in at school while maintaining cultural identity at home, leading to feelings of alienation and identity conflict (Ghuman, 1994). Also, that, newly arrived women and children often lacked social networks outside their immediate families. Limited access to social services and the hostility of their new environment contributed to feelings of loneliness and disconnection.

This isolation made integration into the broader community particularly challenging (Hoque, 2015). Despite these challenges, Sylheti Bengali families employed a range of strategies to navigate their new environment. Community institutions, such as mosques, cultural centers, and organizations like the Brick Lane Mosque, played pivotal roles in providing emotional, social, and practical support. These spaces facilitated integration while preserving cultural identity, offering services such as language classes, job training, and social activities (Eade & Garbin, 2006; Alam, 2021). Families maintained cultural practices as a way of creating stability and continuity.

The Sylheti language, religious rituals, and celebrations of cultural festivals were central to this preservation effort, fostering a sense of belonging and identity (Gardner, 2002; Rajina, 2018). Education emerged as a critical strategy for social mobility and integration. Parents placed significant emphasis on ensuring their children excelled academically, viewing education as a pathway to economic advancement and as a means of asserting their place within British society (Hoque, 2015).

The secondary data also highlight the enduring effects of reunification on identity and community cohesion. The younger generation developed hybrid identities that blended Sylheti and British cultural elements. This hybridity, while adaptive, often led to internal family tensions around cultural preservation and integration (Alexander & Knowles, 2020). Shared experiences of migration, adaptation, and resistance to discrimination strengthened collective identity and community cohesion. This solidarity manifested in community activism, political participation, and the establishment of cultural institutions that supported identity formation (Eade & Garbin, 2006; Alam, 2021). Generational differences in identity negotiation contributed to a dynamic process of cultural adaptation. While the older generation emphasized the preservation of traditional values, the younger generation engaged more actively with British culture, leading to the evolution of a distinct Sylheti British identity (Hoque, 2015).

While secondary data provide valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged; Government reports and census data often fail to capture the nuanced, individual experiences of reunification. For example, the emotional and psychological dimensions of family adaptation are not adequately reflected in these sources, and Academic studies and oral histories may reflect specific perspectives or focus on particular aspects of reunification, potentially overlooking other significant experiences (Rajina, 2018)

The secondary data analysis of reunification experiences among the Sylheti Bengali community in the UK reveals a complex and multifaceted process of adaptation, identity formation, and community building. Despite the significant challenges they faced, including economic hardships, cultural adjustment, and social isolation, Sylheti Bengali families employed a range of strategies to navigate the reunification process and create a sense of belonging in their new environment. The long-term effects of reunification on identity and community cohesion are evident in the development of hybrid identities among the younger generation, the strengthening of collective identity within the community, and the dynamic process of intergenerational continuity and change. These findings underscore the importance of understanding reunification not just as a logistical process but as a critical moment of identity negotiation and reconfiguration for migrant communities. By analysing secondary data, this section provides valuable insights into the experiences of Sylheti Bengali families during reunification and highlights the resilience and adaptability of the community in the face of significant challenges.

However, it also points to the need for further research, particularly in capturing the ongoing and evolving nature of identity dynamics within the Sylheti Bengali community.

5.6. Epilogue

This chapter has explored the experiences and identity dynamics of the Sylheti Bengali community during the family reunifications of the 1980s in the United Kingdom. The process of reunification marked a significant turning point for the community, as it brought about profound changes in family structure, gender roles, generational dynamics, and cultural identity.

Reunifications were driven by changes in UK immigration policies and the socio-economic realities in both Sylhet and the UK. The 1971 Immigration Act, which allowed for the entry of dependents, played a pivotal role in facilitating these reunifications. This period saw the transition of the Sylheti Bengali community from a predominantly male, sojourner population to a more settled family-based community, significantly altering the dynamics of identity and belonging. The arrival of women and children led to a reconfiguration of gender roles within the community, as women took on new responsibilities both within and outside the home. This shift challenged traditional patriarchal structures and required families to renegotiate cultural expectations in the context of life in the UK.

The younger generation, particularly those who arrived in the UK as children or were born there, played a crucial role as cultural mediators. They navigated the dual pressures of maintaining their cultural identity at home while integrating into British society, leading to the development of hybrid identities that blended elements of both Sylheti and British culture.

The negotiation of cultural identity involved both preservation and adaptation. While families worked to maintain their cultural and religious practices, they also had to adapt to the new socio-cultural environment, resulting in a complex and dynamic process of identity formation. The identity shifts during reunification were analysed through several theoretical frameworks, including diaspora studies, transnationalism, postcolonial theory, and feminist and intersectional theories. These frameworks helped to illuminate the processes of identity formation, negotiation, and reconfiguration that emerged as families adapted to life in the UK. The concepts of diaspora and transnationalism highlighted the dual connection to desh and bidesh and the emergence of transnational identities that linked Sylhet and the UK. Postcolonial theory provided insights into the power dynamics and hybridity involved in identity formation, while feminist and intersectional theories emphasized the role of gender and generation in shaping identity dynamics.

The analysis of secondary data, including academic studies, government reports, oral histories, and community archives, revealed the challenges faced by Sylheti Bengali families during reunification, including economic hardships, cultural adjustment, and social isolation. Despite these challenges, families employed various strategies to adapt, such as relying on community support networks, preserving cultural practices, and emphasizing education as a means of social mobility. The long-term effects of reunification included the development of hybrid identities, the strengthening of collective identity and community cohesion, and the ongoing negotiation of intergenerational continuity and change.

The family reunifications of the 1980s were a transformative period for the Sylheti Bengali community in the UK, leading to significant changes in identity, social structures, and community dynamics. The process of reunification required families to navigate complex challenges and adapt to a new socio-cultural environment, resulting in the reconfiguration of traditional roles and the development of hybrid and transnational identities.

This chapter has provided a comprehensive analysis of these identity dynamics, drawing on theoretical frameworks and secondary data to explore the multifaceted experiences of Sylheti Bengali families during reunification. The findings underscore the importance of understanding reunification not just as a logistical process but as a critical moment of identity negotiation and reconfiguration for migrant communities.

Overall, the reunification experiences of the Sylheti Bengali community highlight the resilience and adaptability of migrant families in the face of significant challenges and contribute to our broader understanding of the processes of identity formation and cultural adaptation in the context of migration.

The Second Generation -Family Re-Unification: My Migration Story

5.7. 1. Prologue

This chapter discusses my transnational migration for the purpose of Family Re-Unification and serves as an example of the more nuanced experiences of second generation of Bengali migration during the 1970s and I980s periods. This chapter is central to my thesis as it details many of the socio-political, as well as economic reasons for immigration and illustrates many of the issues experienced upon settlement. It is also the more condensed autoethnography element. After some deliberation, I have opted for including my own migration story and Baptism of fire in this chapter rather than in the previous for many reasons: to initiate the discussion on transnational migration for family reunification and lend to the many existing experiences of Bengali families on this journey. I was part of that influx of people from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh who came to the UK's London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Like many other children we had travelled with our parents and siblings to an unknown place compensated by the promise of having our fathers in our lives. Family reunification almost always involved mother and child(ren) arriving to join their menfolk.

An analysis of this decade also enables me to explore my own identity and the factors that have shaped and contributed to my own notions of selfhood and belonging (Sarup 1996) As a final year undergraduate student I had undertaken a Career Development module and as part of the final assessment for this I was tasked with writing a Personal Development Project. This had my first opportunity for an academic enquiry on a very personal reflective story. I found the whole exercise highly rewarding, but it also raised some pertinent questions on how I have (and continue to) negotiate my identity. Completing this project has enabled me to understand the intricacies involved in articulating personal narratives through academic writing. On receiving the highest mark in my class I was further motivated to develop the skills acquired.

I feel that the 1980s was 'my decade', my 'growing up years'. I witnessed the creation of a vibrant and dynamic Bengali British Social field in Tower Hamlets against many odds. My desire for volunteering stemmed from the need to change the living conditions of a community struggling to make ends meet against the shadow of a wealthy and prosperous city of London, a mere twenty minutes' walk from my parents' home. My intention and purpose with my migration story or indeed this auto ethnography study as a whole is not so much as to only provide 'an insider' view but rather that my narrative of lived reality illustrates the experiences of others like me and of families like my own.

Subsequent sections of this chapter will explore the often-neglected impact of transnational migration on Bengali women and their coping strategies in their new homes. This will be followed by an analysis of Tower Hamlets, our new home in bidesh followed by an examination of the racism that greeted us and our subsequent activism, highlighting key events such as the murder of Altab Ali and the mobilisation of the Bengali community in response. The chapter will also discuss the enduring relevance of Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech and its implications for racial tensions in the UK.

Finally, the chapter will conclude with an epilogue that synthesises the main points discussed, reflecting on how the second generation of Bengali migrants envisioned a new concept of "home" that blends their experiences of desh and bidesh.

Tower Hamlet is home to the largest Bengali community outside of Bangladesh itself and this has led to the coining of the term, Londonis. Bengalis from other parts of the UK are referred as such. This phenomenon strengthened the conflation of Desh-Bidesh; the second generation traversed an in between place, neither fully home in either desh or bidesh and often home was both. The following is my migration story.

5.7.1a. The Journey into the Unknown

I was barely a child, just shy of double digits, when we landed at London's Heathrow Airport on a mid-April afternoon. My very first thought, then and whenever I recall that memory, was how cold I felt stepping off that plane. Accompanied by my parents, younger sister, and toddler brother, the journey had been uneventful but fraught with emotions. My mother spent much of the time tending to my restless brother, while my sister alternated between loudly asking questions and moments of silent awe at our surroundings. My father, who had returned to Sylhet months earlier to organise this journey, appeared lost in thought for most of the flight. Now, as a parent myself, I often reflect on what might have been going through his mind on that day, especially since his passing in 2012.

Our migration, though necessary, had been accompanied by a profound sense of loss. The promise of reuniting our family came at the cost of leaving behind the familiarity of home—desh—and the emotional anchors of doting relatives, including my maternal grandparents, Nanni (maternal grandmother), and Khala (mother's younger sister), who were like second mothers to me. Even as a child grappling with intense ear pain, I wondered why we were leaving behind everything I knew. The migration was never explained to us children, save for the vague assurance that I would receive medical treatment in London and that we might not return for a while. Yet the intensity of my grandparents' farewell, the fervent packing of our household, and the solemnity of my parents hinted at a monumental shift in our lives.

This moment of transition aligns with W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness (1903), which describes the internal conflict experienced by individuals navigating two cultural worlds. For our family, the move to London was not just geographical but marked the beginning of a duality in identity: maintaining the cultural traditions of Sylhet while adapting to life in bidesh (abroad). For my father, who had already spent years in London, this journey represented the culmination of his efforts to bridge two worlds—creating a life in Britain while ensuring his family remained connected to their heritage. For me, however, it marked the start of an internal negotiation, one that would evolve over the decades as I navigated my sense of belonging in both places.

Our migration also underscores the interplay of cultural norms in shaping family dynamics. In Sylhet, it was customary for children not to question their parents or elders—a practice rooted in the cultural norms of respect and deference. Stuart Hall's (1990) concept of cultural identity as a process of "becoming" highlights how such practices are not static but evolve with context. Decades later, as a parent raising British-born children, I witnessed a complete shift in this dynamic. In England, it became important for us to encourage our children to ask questions, engage in debates, and participate in family decisions. This evolution of parenting styles reflects Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space, where hybrid identities and practices emerge through cultural negotiation and adaptation. While I do not argue that one approach is superior to the other, both parenting styles reflect the respective environments in which they thrived.

In Sylhet, unquestioning obedience was integral to maintaining harmony within hierarchical family structures, while in Britain, fostering critical thinking and open dialogue became

essential for preparing children to navigate a multicultural and individualistic society. This shift also exemplifies Anthony Giddens' (1991) notion of reflexive modernity, where individuals and families adapt their practices in response to new social and cultural contexts.

The emotional weight of migration is central to the narrative of belonging. For my parents, particularly my father, the journey was not only about economic opportunity but also about creating stability for the family in a foreign land. This resonates with the "myth of return" described by Anwar (1979), where early migrants often envisioned their stay abroad as temporary, with plans to return to their homeland once financial goals were met. However, as the family settled in London, the idea of return became less tenable, and the focus shifted toward integrating into British society while preserving connections to Sylhet. This duality reflects Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities, where shared cultural practices and narratives help sustain a sense of belonging across geographical divides. Looking back, the decisions my parents made during this period laid the foundation for how I, and later my children, would navigate identity and belonging.

For me, migration was a disruption—leaving behind loved ones and the familiarity of desh. For my parents, it was a calculated decision to secure a better future for their family. This intergenerational negotiation of identity is further illustrated by the differing experiences of my children, who were raised in Britain and had a more fluid understanding of their dual heritage. Their ability to question, debate, and participate in family decisions reflects not only a shift in parenting styles but also their adaptation to the cultural expectations of their British upbringing. Stuart Hall's (1990) theory emphasises that identity is not fixed but a continuous process shaped by history and context**.**

My family's migration journey illustrates this fluidity, as each generation renegotiates its sense of self in response to the challenges and opportunities of its environment. While my childhood in Sylhet was defined by deference and adherence to tradition, my children’s upbringing in London reflects a hybridity that blends elements of Sylheti and British cultural practices. Through this lens, the journey from Sylhet to London was not merely a physical migration but a profound transformation of identity and belonging, influenced by generational shifts, cultural adaptation, and the ongoing negotiation of desh and bidesh. This narrative underscores the resilience and adaptability of diasporic families as they navigate the complexities of life in a transnational world.

Reflecting on my father’s life, I argue that he was not merely an "intercontinental commuter," as Ballard (1994:150) describes the early Bengali men who travelled between Britain and Bangladesh before immigration restrictions redefined their status. Instead, my father embodied a dual sense of belonging, effortlessly navigating the cultural and emotional landscapes of both the West and the East. This balance, however, became increasingly complex once he assumed the roles of husband and father. Unlike many of his contemporaries, my father’s connection to desh was not primarily economic. Our family in Bangladesh was financially stable, relying not on remittances but on inherited resources. Having been raised in London from his early teens by his father, (my dadda) my father maintained a solitary tie to desh—his mother, my daddi who resolutely refused to leave the land of her ancestors. His connection to desh expanded with marriage, followed by the births of his three children, stretching the bind between two worlds. It was the convergence of several factors, including immigration restrictions, political instability, and a personal crisis, that ultimately compelled him to bring his family to Britain for permanent settlement.

The Sylheti Bengali migration narrative differs significantly from that of other South Asian groups. While Pakistani men from Mirpur often reunited with their families within five to twenty years of their arrival, Sylheti pioneers took much longer to make similar arrangements (Ballard, 2001). My own family's migration history further deviates from this trend. It was my dadda not my father, who was the family pioneer, bringing his eldest son to London while his wife and younger son remained in desh. This exception underscores the diversity within migration patterns, challenging monolithic assumptions about diasporic experiences.

The Immigration Act of 1971, which came into effect the following year, profoundly altered migration dynamics. The act restricted immigration but allowed for the reunification of families, permitting only wives and dependents under the age of sixteen to join UK-based husbands and fathers (Anwar, 1995). This created a sense of urgency among migrants, who feared missing the narrow window to bring their families to Britain (Gardner & Shakur, 1994). Coinciding with the Act was the emergence of an independent Bangladesh, which brought its own set of challenges. The political and economic instability that followed the Liberation War of 1971 heightened the anxieties of many migrants, who worried about the safety and well-being of their families.

For my father, these concerns were deeply personal. Two of my mammas (maternal uncles) had played prominent roles in the Bangladesh Liberation War, bringing the political struggle directly into my maternal family's door. One of my uncles remained in politics, taking on a key government position in the nascent Bangladeshi state. This reality made my mother understandably reluctant to leave her family during such uncertain times, adding another layer of complexity to my father's decision-making process. Torn between his dual attachments to desh and bidesh, my father contemplated what was best for our family while witnessing friends and acquaintances bring their families to Britain.

The decision to bring us to Britain was ultimately precipitated by a personal crisis. As my father deliberated on the possibility of settling his family in the UK, an accident in Bangladesh, a consequence of which left me with total sensorineural hearing loss in one ear and moderate loss in the other. My father took the earliest flight to Sylhet. After consultations in Sylhet and Dhaka, the recommendation was clear: I required surgery best performed in London. My father quickly made arrangements for me to undergo a Myringoplasty operation at the Royal London Hospital and organised travel plans for my mother, younger sister, and toddler brother.

On a cold April day, we landed at Heathrow Airport, our lives forever altered. For my father, this marked the culmination of a journey spanning continents and decades, balancing cultural obligations and familial responsibilities. For me, it was the beginning of a new chapter in a place I had only known through the toys and books my father had brought during his visits. The migration narrative was not simply about physical relocation; it was an intricate tapestry woven with sociological and political threads. From my childhood perspective, the journey was framed by the urgency of my medical needs, but the emotional weight of leaving desh was palpable. The tearful goodbyes of my maternal grandparents and the hurried packing of our household spoke to the permanence of our departure, even if this reality was not fully articulated to us children.

The cultural norms of our Sylheti upbringing, where questioning one's elders was considered impolite, meant that my parents' decisions were rarely challenged. This dynamic stood in stark contrast to the parenting style my siblings and I would later adopt in Britain, where open dialogue and participatory decision-making became central to our family life. This shift reflects Stuart Hall's (1990) theory of cultural identity as a process of becoming, shaped by historical

and social contexts. As parents in Britain, we adapted our practices to fit a new cultural milieu, fostering an environment where our children could navigate their identities with greater autonomy.

The journey from Sylhet to London exemplifies Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space, where hybrid identities are negotiated. For my father, the move solidified his role as a provider straddling two worlds, yet it also marked the end of his status as a perpetual traveller. His dual sense of belonging evolved into a commitment to building a life in Britain while maintaining ties to desh. For me, this migration planted the seeds of a diasporic identity, one that would grow in complexity as I navigated the intersections of Sylheti heritage and British life. This migration was not just a journey of necessity but one that encapsulated the broader dynamics of identity, belonging, and cultural adaptation. My father's decision to bring us to Britain was shaped by a confluence of personal, political, and cultural factors, highlighting the multifaceted nature of diasporic experiences.

5.7.1b. A Baptism of Fire

When we arrived in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, my parents had planned for us to stay with one of my father's distant uncles and his wife. They had lived in East London for many years, and their home was within walking distance of the Royal London Hospital, where I was scheduled for pre-operative appointments and surgery. My father believed this arrangement would provide a secure environment for my mother to "find her feet" before we moved to a place we could call home. While my surgery partially alleviated the intense pain I had been experiencing, it left me with profound hearing impairment—a facet of my identity I continue to grapple with today.

The challenges of being hard of hearing were compounded by my inability to use hearing aids or implants due to migraines. Communication often drained my energy, forcing me to rely on self-taught strategies like strategic seating and lip-reading. Misunderstandings persisted, however, sometimes leading others to perceive me as aloof or inattentive. Public interactions occasionally revealed implicit biases. Wearing a hijab, combined with my quizzical looks when I failed to hear someone, often reinforced stereotypes about Muslim women. For example, a ticket clerk once assumed I couldn't speak English and spoke to me slowly, as if I were a foreigner.

On another occasion, a council receptionist approached me with misplaced concern, assuming I was a victim in need of rescue. These experiences exemplify Stuart Hall's (1990) concept of cultural identity as a fluid and dynamic process shaped by context and interaction. My visible markers of identity—a hijab, my Bengali heritage, and my hearing impairment—intersected to create a unique set of perceptions and challenges, illustrating how identity can be both empowering and constraining depending on the social context. These moments also reflect Erving Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, where visible traits can lead to biased assumptions that affect social interactions and identity formation.

Nearly a year after our arrival, my father went out for some groceries, including tangerines I had requested. Shortly after, there was a loud, urgent knocking at the door. It was our downstairs neighbour, visibly distressed, informing my mother that my father had been shot at the end of the street. He handed her a blood-stained shopping bag—my father's blood. My mother sent me to find out where he was taken, but by the time I got outside, the ambulance had already left. The attack, as we later learned, was perpetrated by a member of the National Front, a far-right group notorious for its racism and violence against South Asians. The bullet, meant to kill, struck my father's hand as he adjusted his tie, narrowly missing his throat. While he survived, he

was never the same. This traumatic event altered the trajectory of our lives, reshaping our collective sense of identity and belonging. Even before my father's attack, the streets of Tower Hamlets bore witness to overt racism. Skinheads spat at our neighbours, bricks shattered windows, and elderly men were verbally abused. National Front members staged intimidating rallies, waving placards and shouting slurs. Following my father's shooting, the atmosphere of hostility intensified. Bengali parents-imposed curfews on their children, and groups of workers commuted together for safety. Tower Hamlets Council even installed fireproof letterboxes to prevent petrol bomb attacks. Police presence often escalated into clashes, underscoring the volatility of the time.

These experiences resonate with W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903) concept of double consciousness, where individuals navigate their identity while contending with how they are perceived by the dominant society. For us, being visibly Bengali and Muslim in the hostile climate of 1970s Britain meant living with the dual awareness of our cultural heritage and the external perception of being outsiders. This duality reinforced our collective identity, as the shared experience of racism and exclusion brought our community closer together. For me, this period marked the beginning of my role as a mediator within my family. With my father hospitalised and my mother caring for my siblings, I became the one to fetch groceries and communicate with neighbours. My early thoughts were filled with questions: Why did this happen? Why couldn't I speak English well enough to help my parents?

Enrolled in a Church of England school, I was one of only five Asian children in the entire school. There were no support structures for non-English-speaking students, and my hearing impairment compounded the challenges of adapting to a new educational environment. However, motivated by the need to support my family, I resolved to take charge of my education. I moved to the front of the class, stayed after school for extra help, and taught myself English by listening to the BBC World Service and watching Panorama. This journey of self-education reflects Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space, where individuals negotiate identity through hybrid practices that draw on multiple cultural frameworks. By combining traditional values of perseverance and familial responsibility with British educational opportunities, I carved out a space for myself that bridged both worlds.

As the eldest sibling, I became the sole breadwinner after leaving school, breaking conventional Bengali family dynamics. My role set a precedent for my younger siblings, particularly my sisters, who would go on to challenge many cultural assumptions. This shift aligns with Anthias and Yuval-Davis' (1992) intersectional approach to identity, where gender, culture, and socio-economic factors intersect to shape individual experiences. My story demonstrates how diasporic identities are negotiated through acts of resistance and adaptation, challenging traditional norms while preserving core cultural values. The trauma of my father's attack and the subsequent challenges our family faced profoundly shaped my sense of identity. My early experiences in Tower Hamlets were a baptism of fire, forcing me to confront the realities of racism, marginalisation, and survival in a new cultural context.

At the same time, these experiences cultivated resilience and adaptability, qualities that continue to define my identity today. The intersection of my hearing impairment, hijab, and status as a Bengali Muslim woman has revealed layers of identity negotiation. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity resonates deeply, as I have navigated the "third space" between cultural heritage and the demands of life in Britain. My self-taught English skills and early forays into work and education reflect Stuart Hall's (1990) idea of cultural identity as a process of becoming, shaped by history and context. My family's journey, from surviving racism to breaking moulds, exemplifies the broader dynamics of diasporic identity. The bonds we forged

in adversity and the paths we carved through resilience highlight the power of collective and individual agency in defining identity and belonging.

5.7.1c. Tying the Threads: My Migration Story and Baptism of Fire

Narrating personal experiences within an auto ethnographical study comes with a degree of trepidation. While this methodology is often the best fit for exploring nuanced and deeply personal themes such as identity and belonging, it requires careful navigation of self-reflection and cultural analysis. The challenge lies not only in deciding which experiences to include but also in balancing the personal (auto) with the cultural (ethno) and methodological (graphy) elements of the research.

Autoethnography, as Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) describe,
"seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (p. 273).

Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang (2010) further assert that it
"utilises data about self and context to gain understanding of the connectivity between self and others" (p. 1).

This methodology allows me to explore the construction of my own identity alongside an intellectual inquiry into identity formation among my research subjects. As Bochner and Ellis (2000) suggest, autoethnography exists on a continuum, allowing the researcher to decide how much emphasis to place on self, culture, or research. This continuum is particularly relevant for my study, where my own migration story and early experiences provide insight into broader themes of identity and belonging within the Sylheti Bengali community.

These personal reflections offer a voice that complements existing narratives, particularly in areas where women's and children's migration experiences have been underrepresented (Adams, 1987; Ahmed & Phillipson, 2011). In this way, my migration story becomes both a personal search and an academic inquiry. It offers an experiential perspective on migration that challenges abstract depictions of migration as mere demographic shifts. Instead, it highlights the socio-political and emotional complexities of such journeys, particularly for children.

As Gilroy (1997) aptly states,
"Identity provides a way of understanding the interplay between our subjective experience of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which that fragile subjectivity is formed" (p. 301).

My arrival in Tower Hamlets was indeed a baptism of fire. After a fraught journey, we were thrust into a new environment that was cold in both climate and reception. This section illustrates the challenges of settlement, especially the confrontation with racism and its enduring consequences. These experiences shaped not only my sense of self but also my academic pursuit of identity as a research subject. Growing up in Bangladesh, even for a short period, I had a clear sense of who I was. Identity, as a theoretical construct, did not exist for me as a child, but I felt an intuitive sense of belonging. This changed upon migration, where my identity became a site of negotiation, shaped by the need to reconcile my subjective experiences with the cultural and historical settings of my new environment (Hall, 1990). My childhood experiences also align with W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903) concept of double consciousness, the feeling of being caught between two worlds. In Tower Hamlets, I navigated the dual pressures of maintaining my Sylheti heritage while adapting to British society. These early negotiations of

identity were marked by moments of alienation and resistance, laying the foundation for my later understanding of identity as both fluid and multifaceted (Hall, 1996).

The racism my family faced upon arrival in Tower Hamlets was not just an external force but a formative experience that shaped our collective identity. The National Front's attack on my father was not an isolated incident but part of a broader climate of hostility toward South Asian migrants. These experiences resonate with Stuart Hall's (1990) notion of identity as a "production," shaped by historical and socio-political contexts. In response to these challenges, my family and the broader Sylheti Bengali community drew on cultural practices and collective solidarity as sources of resilience. Mosques, community centres, and social networks became sites of both cultural preservation and resistance, reinforcing our connection to desh while carving out a space in bidesh. This dual connection reflects the concept of transnationalism (Vertovec, 1999), where identities are constructed through ties that span national borders.

Using autoethnography to explore my migration story allows for a deeper understanding of identity and belonging as lived experiences. This methodology bridges the gap between personal narrative and cultural analysis, offering insights into how identity is negotiated in the face of migration, racism, and cultural dislocation. By reflecting on my journey, I not only uncover the roots of my own identity but also contribute to the broader discourse on identity formation within diasporic communities. As Woodward (2004) posits, the question of "Who am I?" is central to any study of identity. My story illustrates how this question is both deeply personal and profoundly influenced by historical, cultural, and social contexts. It underscores the importance of viewing identity not as a fixed construct but as a dynamic and evolving process shaped by interaction, memory, and resistance.

5.8.1. 1980s Tower Hamlets: A Community Under Siege

In the 1980s, Tower Hamlets in East London became a crucible of resilience and resistance for the Sylheti Bengali community, who faced intense racial hostility and systemic marginalisation. After moving from Poplar to Aldgate, my family, like many others, was thrust into an environment where extreme white supremacist groups such as the National Front waged organised campaigns of violence and intimidation against the Bangladeshi community. Slogans like "White is Right" and "Blacks Out" epitomised the hateful rhetoric of the time. Brick Lane, now renowned for its cultural vibrancy, was then a site of fear and hostility. Skinheads roamed the streets, engaging in acts of "Paki-bashing," vandalism, and intimidation. This section examines the socio-political context that fuelled this hostility, the racism faced by the Bengali community, and how these experiences mobilised the community into collective action and activism. Theoretical insights, including Collective Identity Theory and Hybridity Theory, are integrated to explore how these challenges shaped community identity.

The 1970s and 1980s in Britain were marked by economic downturns, deindustrialisation, and social inequality, which created fertile ground for racial scapegoating (Alexander, 2000). Immigrant communities, particularly South Asians, became targets of racist rhetoric and systemic discrimination. The Sylheti Bengali community in Tower Hamlets was especially vulnerable, facing both overt violence and institutional exclusion. Far-right groups like the National Front capitalised on economic anxieties and targeted Tower Hamlets as a focal point for their activities. Marches, rallies, and physical violence became regular occurrences, creating an atmosphere of fear for the Bengali community. Bengalis were frequent targets of physical and verbal abuse. Institutional neglect exacerbated the problem, with local authorities often slow or unwilling to intervene (Kundnani, 2001). Systemic racism reinforced the community's exclusion and hardship. Housing discrimination left Bengali families in overcrowded,

substandard conditions (Eade, 1997). Educational segregation and marginalisation meant that Bengali children were often placed in lower sets or tracked into vocational streams, limiting their academic and career prospects (Begum & Eade, 2005).
Employment opportunities were scarce, and many Sylheti Bengalis were relegated to insecure, low-paying jobs.

Faced with a hostile environment, the Sylheti Bengali community mobilised to resist these challenges, drawing on Collective Identity Theory. This theory posits that shared experiences of marginalisation and discrimination can foster solidarity and motivate collective action (Melucci, 1995). For the Bengali community, collective identity became both a resource for resilience and a platform for activism.

A pivotal moment in the community's resistance was the 1978 murder of Altab Ali, a young Bengali garment worker, in a racially motivated attack in Whitechapel. His death galvanised the community, leading to widespread protests and the eventual naming of Altab Ali Park in his memory. This park became a symbol of resilience and a space for communal mourning and solidarity. The mobilisation following Ali's murder highlighted how collective identity could be harnessed to resist oppression and assert the community's presence in the face of exclusion.
The community responded to systemic neglect and overt hostility by establishing grassroots organisations. Mosques, cultural centres, and community groups provided spaces for social support, political organising, and cultural preservation. These institutions not only addressed immediate needs, such as housing assistance and legal support, but also became hubs for resistance and advocacy, fostering a sense of agency and belonging (Eade & Garbin, 2006).
Melucci's (1995) framework on collective identity helps to explain how the Bengali community in Tower Hamlets coalesced around shared experiences of racism and marginalisation.

Collective identity became a mechanism for solidarity, enabling the community to mobilise against both systemic and overt forms of racism. This shared identity was constructed through symbols, such as the Altab Ali Park, and practices, such as communal protests and cultural events, which reinforced a sense of unity. Du Bois's (1903) concept of double consciousness is also relevant to understanding the identity struggles faced by Bengalis in Tower Hamlets. While they worked to preserve their Sylheti heritage, they were simultaneously navigating their racialised identity as "others" within British society. This duality required constant negotiation, as the community resisted both external oppression and the internal pressures of cultural preservation. Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity provides insight into how the Bengali community adapted to their environment while maintaining cultural continuity. The blending of Sylheti and British cultural elements allowed the community to forge a unique identity that resisted assimilation but remained dynamic and adaptive. This hybridity was evident in how the younger generation, particularly those engaged in activism, embraced both their heritage and their rights as British citizens.

The experiences of 1980s Tower Hamlets left an indelible mark on the Sylheti Bengali community. The challenges of systemic racism and overt hostility were met with remarkable resilience, as the community came together to resist oppression and assert their right to belong. This period of activism not only helped to secure tangible improvements, such as safer housing and better educational opportunities, but also strengthened the community's collective identity. Theoretical insights reveal that this collective identity was not static but constantly evolving, shaped by the interplay of external pressures and internal dynamics. The community's ability to adapt and resist serves as a testament to the transformative power of solidarity and the ongoing negotiation of identity and belonging in the face of adversity.

5.8.2. Mobilisation and Resilience: The Murder of Altab Ali

When my family arrived in Tower Hamlets, it was just two years after the racially motivated murder of Altab Ali, a 25-year-old Bangladeshi garment worker. Ali was brutally killed on Alder Street, a short distance from Brick Lane, on May 4, 1978—nine years after emigrating from Bangladesh. His murder was not an isolated act of violence but a manifestation of the racial antagonism that had been simmering throughout the 1970s. It marked a tragic and galvanizing moment for the Bangladeshi community, spurring them to mobilise against the systemic racism and hostility that had long defined their lives (Nye & Bright, 2019). The response from the local Bangladeshi community was swift, organised, and determined. Within ten days of Ali's murder, approximately 7,000 people marched behind his coffin to 10 Downing Street. This powerful act of solidarity was more than just a protest against Ali's murder; it was a demand for recognition, protection, and justice. The march highlighted the structural inequalities and institutionalised racism that had contributed to the conditions allowing such violence to occur. It marked a turning point, transforming the Bengali community from a marginalised and often invisible population into a politically mobilised force.

This moment of mobilisation is best understood through Charles Taylor's (1994) concept of the Politics of Recognition. Taylor argues that identity is profoundly shaped by how it is recognised or misrecognised by others. Misrecognition, or a failure to acknowledge the dignity and contributions of a group, can impose significant harm, relegating individuals to a diminished sense of self. For the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets, the murder of Altab Ali symbolised years of non-recognition and marginalisation. The march to Downing Street was a collective assertion of their visibility, dignity, and rightful place within British society. It was not only a demand for justice for Ali but also a broader call for respect and equality.

The mobilisation following Altab Ali's murder can also be analysed through the lens of Collective Identity Theory (Melucci, 1995). This theory posits that collective identity emerges when a group recognises its shared experiences, values, and goals, enabling coordinated action in pursuit of common objectives. For the Bangladeshi community, Ali's murder crystallised their shared experiences of racism and exclusion, fostering a collective identity that became the foundation for sustained activism. This collective identity was expressed through symbolic acts, such as the naming of Altab Ali Park, which transformed a site of tragedy into a space of resilience and remembrance. It was further reinforced through cultural and political mobilisation, as community leaders and grassroots organisations worked to address the structural inequalities that had long plagued their lives. The solidarity forged in the wake of Ali's murder laid the groundwork for continued advocacy and resistance, ensuring that his death would not be in vain.

The response to Ali's murder also exemplifies Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of Hybridity, which explores how marginalised groups negotiate identity in the context of oppression. The Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets was navigating the dual pressures of maintaining their cultural heritage while asserting their place in British society. Their mobilisation against racism was a form of resistance that drew on both their cultural traditions of solidarity and their emerging political consciousness as British citizens. This hybrid identity allowed them to challenge both the external forces of racism and the internal divisions within their community, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic sense of belonging.

The murder of Altab Ali and the community's response had a profound and lasting impact. It catalysed a wave of activism that addressed not only the immediate threat of racial violence but also the broader structural inequalities that perpetuated marginalisation. The creation of Altab Ali Park, the establishment of community organisations, and the increasing political

engagement of the Bengali community are all testaments to the resilience and determination that emerged from this period. Ali's murder remains a pivotal moment in the history of Tower Hamlets, symbolising both the pain of racial hatred and the power of collective action. The mobilisation it inspired continues to inform the community's identity and activism, offering valuable lessons about the importance of solidarity, recognition, and resistance in the face of injustice.

To fully grasp the racial hostility that culminated in Ali's murder, it is essential to examine the broader socio-political context of the time. One of the most significant precursors to this volatile period was Enoch Powell's infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech, delivered in 1968. Powell's rhetoric vilified immigrants as a threat to British identity and social cohesion, predicting violent racial conflicts if immigration continued unchecked. His speech emboldened far-right groups like the National Front, legitimising racist ideologies and fostering a climate of hostility toward minority communities. The "Rivers of Blood" speech had a profound impact, particularly in urban areas like Tower Hamlets, which had significant immigrant populations. By framing immigrants as an existential threat to Britain, Powell created a narrative that aligned with the fears and frustrations of certain sections of the population facing economic challenges, such as unemployment and housing shortages. This narrative lit the tinderbox of racial tensions, providing ideological support for groups that sought to intimidate and marginalise immigrant communities.

5.8.3. Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" Speech: Matchstick for the Tinderbox

On April 20, 1968, Enoch Powell, a British Conservative Member of Parliament (MP) for Wolverhampton Southwest, delivered what has become one of the most controversial speeches in British political history. Commonly referred to as the "Rivers of Blood" speech, Powell's address was a fierce warning against the perceived dangers of mass immigration and the changing demographic landscape in Britain. Delivered in Birmingham to a meeting of the Conservative Political Centre, the speech had an immediate and long-lasting impact on British society and politics, especially concerning race relations and immigration policy. The speech was delivered during a period of significant social and political change in Britain.

Post-war immigration had brought a substantial number of people from former British colonies, particularly from, South Asia, as well as from Africa and the Caribbean to the UK. These immigrants were invited to Britain to help rebuild Britain; contribute to the post-war economy and fill labour shortages. However, their presence also sparked a range of reactions, from acceptance and support for multiculturalism to fear and hostility. By the late 1960s, racial tensions were rising, and debates about the impact of immigration were becoming increasingly polarized (Hansen, 2000).

Enoch Powell, who had been a prominent political figure and a former cabinet minister, became one of the most vocal critics of immigration. He was particularly concerned about the pace and scale of immigration and its effects on British society. Powell's speech in Birmingham was a culmination of his growing unease and his attempt to articulate the fears of many within the British population who felt threatened by the demographic changes (Schofield, 2013).
The "Rivers of Blood" speech is infamous for its use of vivid and apocalyptic imagery. Powell referenced a line from Virgil's Aeneid: "As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see the River Tiber foaming with much blood" (Powell, 1968). This classical allusion was meant to evoke a sense of impending disaster, suggesting that continued immigration would lead to social unrest and possibly violent conflict in Britain. In his speech, Powell argued that mass immigration was leading to the creation of a "nation within a nation,"

with different ethnic groups living separately, which he believed would result in increased tensions and divisions. He warned that the indigenous population would become a minority in their own country, a situation he portrayed as a betrayal by the British government. He predicted dire consequences if immigration was not severely curtailed and criticised the government's efforts to promote racial equality through legislation, such as the Race Relations Act of 1968, which he claimed would only exacerbate racial tensions (Goodhart, 2004).

Powell also used anecdotal evidence to illustrate his points, often citing stories from his constituents who allegedly felt alienated or threatened by the presence of immigrant communities. He spoke of an elderly woman who feared losing her home due to the arrival of immigrant families in her neighbourhood and of British citizens feeling like “strangers in their own country” (Schofield, 2013). These anecdotes, while unverifiable, were effective in stirring up emotions and appealing to the fears and insecurities of his audience.

Powell’s speech is a striking example of the use of rhetoric to provoke and persuade. His choice of classical references, such as the allusion to the Aeneid, gave his argument an air of historical inevitability and framed the issue as one of existential importance for the nation. The speech is also notable for its emotional appeal, particularly its appeal to fear. By portraying immigration as a looming disaster, Powell sought to mobilise public opinion against the government’s policies (Vinen, 2014). Powell’s rhetoric was deliberately divisive and provocative. He positioned himself as a defender of the "silent majority," whom he claimed were being ignored by the political establishment. This populist appeal was intended to resonate with those who felt that their concerns about immigration were being dismissed or downplayed by the mainstream political parties (Copsey, 2008).

The reaction to Powell’s speech was immediate and polarised. Within the Conservative Party, the speech caused a significant rift. The party leader, Edward Heath, condemned the speech and dismissed Powell from his position as Shadow Defence Secretary the day after the speech. Heath’s decision was a clear signal that the Conservative Party would not endorse the overtly racist rhetoric Powell had used, although the speech continued to resonate with many within the party and the wider public (Solomos, 2003). Publicly, Powell’s speech garnered both support and condemnation. He received thousands of letters from people who shared his views, and a Gallup poll conducted shortly after the speech indicated that 74% of respondents agreed with Powell’s warnings about immigration (Goodhart, 2004).

This support highlighted the extent to which Powell had tapped into a deep-seated anxiety about immigration and cultural change among sections of the British population. However, the speech also had significant negative consequences. It contributed to the rise of far-right movements in Britain, such as the National Front, which capitalised on the sentiments Powell expressed to bolster their anti-immigration agendas. The speech also influenced the broader discourse on race and immigration, making it more acceptable for politicians and the public to express concerns about immigration in overtly racial terms (Copsey, 2008).

Fast forwarding decades later, the long-term impact of Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech is still a matter of debate among historians and political analysts. On one hand, the speech is seen as a pivotal moment that brought the issue of immigration to the forefront of British politics. It is often credited with laying the groundwork for the anti-immigration sentiment that would later be exploited by political movements such as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and during the Brexit referendum of 2016 (Schofield, 2013). On the other hand, the speech also left a lasting stain on Powell’s legacy. Despite his earlier achievements as a politician and scholar, Powell is primarily remembered for this one speech and its association with racial intolerance.

The phrase “Rivers of Blood” has become synonymous with inflammatory and divisive rhetoric, and Powell’s name is often invoked in discussions about the dangers of exploiting racial fears for political gain (Fryer, 1984). In the decades since the speech, Britain has continued to grapple with issues of race, immigration, and national identity. While Powell’s predictions of widespread civil unrest did not materialise, the speech remains a powerful reminder of the potent role that rhetoric and public discourse play in shaping societal attitudes. It serves as a case study in the complex and often fraught relationship between politics, race, and identity in Britain (Solomos, 2003). While Powell’s apocalyptic warnings were not borne out by subsequent events, the speech remains a potent symbol of the power of rhetoric to influence public opinion and shape political debate.

The speech continues to resonate in discussions about race, immigration, and the politics of identity in present day Britain; Powell had described the future generations as ‘the descendants of immigrants…’ thus even if you are born here, you were ‘other’ ‘less than’ in your own country. Thus, Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech stands as one of the most significant and controversial interventions in the history of British politics. Its impact on the discourse surrounding immigration and race in Britain has been profound and long-lasting.

5.8.4. Altab Ali Park: A Symbol of Resistance and Community

Altab Ali Park, located near the heart of Tower Hamlets, carries profound symbolic significance for the British Bengali community. Its renaming in memory of Altab Ali transformed the park into a site of resistance, resilience, and cultural identity. For my family, who lived just three streets away, the park was a constant presence. During my late teens and twenties, my daily commute to work involved walking across the park to Aldgate East Station. Yet, despite this proximity, I rarely sat on the park’s benches, a reflection of the unspoken gender norms that shaped the community's use of public spaces. In those years, it was the "elderly uncles"—community leaders or older men who were familiar and respected figures—who often occupied the park benches, either sitting alone in quiet contemplation or engaging in conversations with others. As a young Bengali woman, it didn’t “feel right” to sit down unprompted, a sentiment shaped by cultural expectations around public behaviour and gender roles. Over time, however, this unspoken rule began to evolve, reflecting broader shifts within the community regarding gender dynamics. The park became a microcosm of the community’s changing attitudes, subtly signalling how traditional norms were being renegotiated as British Bengali women increasingly asserted their presence in public spaces.

The renaming of the park in honour of Altab Ali sent a powerful message: the Bangladeshi community was no longer willing to tolerate the violence and intimidation of far-right groups and fascists. Altab Ali Park became synonymous with the community's determination to stand firm against racism and assert their place in British society. It served as a tangible reminder of the community’s struggles and victories, a space that embodied both grief and defiance. The park’s symbolic transformation reinforced the collective identity of the Bangladeshi community as a group united in resilience and resistance. This collective identity aligns with Charles Taylor’s (1994) concept of the Politics of Recognition, which emphasises the importance of being seen and respected within society. By renaming the park and holding public events there, the community asserted their dignity and demanded recognition as equal citizens of Britain. The park became not just a physical space but a focal point for cultural and political expression, amplifying the voices of those who had long been marginalised.

The installation of the Shahid Minar (Martyrs’ Monument) within the park further deepened its significance. The monument, which commemorates the Bengali Language Movement and those who died defending their linguistic and cultural heritage, is a powerful symbol of the

community's ties to their homeland. For British Bengalis, it stands as a reminder of the struggles for identity and belonging that transcend national borders. The monument also represents the community's pride in their linguistic and cultural heritage, serving as a space where their transnational identity can be celebrated and preserved. However, the Shahid Minar also reflects the internal diversity and tensions within the Bangladeshi community. During events like the Baishakhi Mela (Bengali New Year celebration), the park becomes a stage for the interplay between cultural nationalism and religious conservatism. While some members of the community proudly embrace these public celebrations as expressions of patriotism and cultural pride, others view them as contradictory to Islamic values. This divide underscores the multifaceted nature of identity within the community, where cultural, national, and religious affiliations sometimes converge and at other times conflict.

The park's location between two prominent mosques—the East London Mosque on Whitechapel Road and the Brick Lane Mosque near its Aldgate end—further situates it as a nexus of cultural and religious identity. These mosques represent different aspects of the community's identity: one as a bastion of religious practice and community cohesion, the other a historic site that reflects the adaptation of a former synagogue into a mosque, symbolising the layered and complex histories of migration and settlement in the East End. This positioning highlights the hybrid identities that British Bengalis navigate daily. As Stuart Hall (1990) posits, cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a process of becoming, shaped by historical and social contexts. Altab Ali Park, situated between these mosques and in the heart of a historically contested space, embodies this ongoing negotiation of identity. It serves as both a reminder of the community's struggles and a platform for its evolving sense of self.

For me, Altab Ali Park represents more than just a physical space—it is a barometer of the community's journey. From its role as a site of mourning and protest to its transformation into a place of cultural celebration and identity negotiation, the park captures the resilience and complexity of the British Bengali experience. It stands as a testament to the community's ability to adapt, resist, and thrive, even in the face of adversity. Whether through the unspoken rules of its use, the installation of the Shahid Minar, or the diversity of events it hosts, the park continues to reflect the evolving dynamics of identity, belonging, and resistance within the British Bengali community.

5.8.5. A Tale of Two Mosques

The East London Mosque and Brick Lane Mosque, both located within Tower Hamlets, are not just places of worship but serve as microcosms of the Bengali community's identity dynamics, generational shifts, and socio-political engagement. These mosques symbolise differing approaches to religious practice, community priorities, and the negotiation of identity within a multicultural and often hostile socio-political landscape.

The East London Mosque, with its extensive resources, structured programs, and historical prominence, has been perceived as a central authority on religious matters for the local Muslim community. Rooted in a more traditional and conservative interpretation of Islam, the mosque has historically appealed to first-generation Bengali immigrants who prioritize religious orthodoxy and cultural preservation. The mosque's emphasis on traditional religious education and community cohesion aligns with the needs and values of older generations, providing a sense of continuity with their heritage.

However, this emphasis on conservatism has sometimes placed the mosque at odds with younger, second-generation Bengalis who are navigating the complexities of British multiculturalism. Many younger community members seek a reconciliation of their Islamic

beliefs with the liberal and secular dimensions of their British identity (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). This generational tension highlights the evolving nature of identity within the Bengali community, as younger Bengalis challenge the orthodoxy upheld by their parents' generation in pursuit of a more progressive and contextually relevant interpretation of Islam.

The Brick Lane Mosque, in contrast, has historically been more grassroots and community-driven, reflecting the changing demographics and attitudes within the Bengali community. While still a religious hub, it has demonstrated greater flexibility in accommodating a range of religious practices and community activities. This openness has made the mosque a focal point for younger Bengalis and those who view religious practice as one component of a broader identity that includes social justice, activism, and cultural engagement (Kershen, 2004). The mosque's location in the heart of a rapidly gentrifying area has also influenced its role. Younger members of the community, engaged with issues such as housing, education, and employment discrimination, have found a platform at the Brick Lane Mosque to address these local concerns. This approach contrasts with the East London Mosque's broader focus on issues affecting the wider Muslim community in Britain, such as Islamophobia, counterterrorism policies, and the role of Islam in public life (Jones, 2013).

The differing approaches of the two mosques highlight generational tensions within the Bengali community. The East London Mosque's focus on traditional values and religious orthodoxy often resonates with first-generation immigrants who prioritize cultural preservation and community cohesion. Meanwhile, the Brick Lane Mosque's engagement with social justice and progressive issues appeals more to the younger generation, who are more likely to identify with intersectional struggles that link their experiences as Muslims with broader social and political movements (Glynn, 2002). This divergence has, at times, exacerbated intra-community tensions. Debates about the appropriate level of political engagement and the focus of community efforts reveal differing priorities within the Bengali community.

For example, some argue that the East London Mosque's emphasis on national and global Muslim issues neglects the specific needs of the Bengali community in Tower Hamlets. Conversely, others believe that the Brick Lane Mosque's focus on local concerns limits its ability to address the broader challenges faced by Muslims across Britain (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). The two mosques also serve as symbols of resistance and identity formation. The East London Mosque's involvement in broader political issues, such as counterterrorism and Islamophobia, positions it as a representative of Muslim communities in Britain, contributing to collective identity as theorised by Charles Taylor (1994). Meanwhile, the Brick Lane Mosque, with its grassroots activism, highlights the importance of addressing local challenges and fostering a sense of belonging within the immediate community.

Altab Ali Park, located between these two mosques, serves as a physical and symbolic nexus for the community. For many, the park has become an informal barometer for the evolving dynamics of gender, generational shifts, and activism within the community. Historically, its benches were predominantly occupied by "elderly uncles," reflecting traditional gender norms. However, over time, younger generations have increasingly claimed the space, challenging these norms and asserting their own identities.

The installation of the Shahid Minar (Martyrs' Monument) in the park underscores the community's dual identity as both British and Bengali. Commemorating the Bengali Language Movement, the monument is a powerful reminder of the community's linguistic and cultural heritage. However, it also reveals internal tensions, particularly during events like the Baishakhi

Mela (Bengali New Year celebration), where divisions emerge between those who celebrate cultural nationalism and those who view such festivities as incompatible with Islamic values.

The challenges faced by the Bengali community in Tower Hamlets, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, catalysed a wave of youth mobilisation. Younger activists, both UK-born and those raised in Tower Hamlets, played pivotal roles in combating racism and advocating for political representation. Many engaged with youth organisations and community movements, addressing local issues such as housing, education, and employment discrimination. These activists not only focused on UK-specific struggles but also connected them to the broader anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements, drawing parallels between the struggles in Bangladesh and those in Britain (Banglastories.org, 2019).

The East London Mosque and Brick Lane Mosque embody the diverse approaches to identity, activism, and community within Tower Hamlets' Bengali population. While their differing priorities and practices reflect generational and ideological tensions, they also highlight the community's adaptability and resilience. Together with Altab Ali Park, these spaces serve as living symbols of the Bengali community's ongoing struggle for recognition, inclusion, and cohesion in a multicultural Britain.

5.8.6. Epilogue

My arrival in Tower Hamlets was, in every sense, a baptism of fire. The journey from a warm and happy home in desh, surrounded by the love and security of extended family, to a cold and unfamiliar bidesh was jarring and overwhelming. As a child, I distinctly recall the confusion and fear I felt: "Why all the anger?" "What had we done to deserve this hostility?"

The Tower Hamlets of the 1980s was a volatile and hostile environment. The murder of Altab Ali in 1978 was not an isolated incident but rather a stark manifestation of the broader racial tensions that had been simmering for years. This tragic event catalysed the Bengali community's mobilization, sparking engagement in what Charles Taylor (1994) refers to as the Politics of Recognition. The Altab Ali murder marked a turning point, as the community collectively demanded visibility, dignity, and justice in the face of systemic racism and far-right violence. These acts of resistance were not merely about survival but about asserting a place within a society that had repeatedly tried to marginalise them. For those of us who lived through that tumultuous period, the memories remain vivid—a tapestry of fear, resilience, and transformation. The socio-political climate of the time, including the emboldening rhetoric of Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood speech, created a toxic atmosphere where racial hostility was normalised. For children like me, who had arrived as part of family reunification efforts, the experience of being told we didn't belong, in a land where our fathers and grandfathers had toiled and called home, left an indelible mark. It was a lesson in resilience and self-definition, as we navigated between rejection and the unyielding determination to carve out a space of belonging.

John Eade's (1989) studies on Tower Hamlets documented the evolution of political activism in the area. He traced a generational shift in priorities: the first-generation migrants, still tethered to the politics of Sylhet and the liberation of Bangladesh, gave way to the second generation, whose activism was rooted in the struggles against racism and the quest for political representation within the UK. For many of us, this shift was not merely political but deeply personal. Children who arrived during the reunification process had witnessed profound sacrifices by their families. They grew up with a burning desire to ensure that the hostility and rejection they faced would not define their lives or those of future generations.

The words of Caroline Adams, author of Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers, encapsulate the legacy of those early pioneers and the generations that followed. When asked if she would write a sequel about the subsequent generations of Bengalis in Britain, she expressed hope that these generations would write their own stories. In her book, she reflects:

"The Bangladeshi community in Britain began to take root, on the territory marked out by the first few casual pioneers who found the way 'across seven seas and thirteen rivers' from Sylhet to Aldgate. Here at last was the memorial to those thousands of nameless who died in cold water and blazing engine rooms. The Empire had finally come home."
(Adams, 1987:66, italics mine)

Adams's words resonate deeply. They encapsulate the struggles, sacrifices, and triumphs of the Sylheti Bengali community. The pioneers who crossed those metaphorical seas and rivers were not just migrants; they were architects of a legacy that subsequent generations inherited and transformed. The resilience, courage, and determination of these early pioneers laid the foundation for a community that not only endured but thrived, shaping the cultural and political landscape of Tower Hamlets and beyond.

As I reflect on my journey and those of others like me, I see a story of defiance against adversity, a refusal to be erased or silenced. The story of Tower Hamlets in the 1980s is not just a narrative of suffering; it is a testament to resilience, activism, and the power of collective identity. Through the sacrifices of our parents, the activism of our peers, and the legacy of our pioneers, we have laid claim to a place in British society, rewriting the narrative of belonging in a country that has not always welcomed us. This epilogue is not just an ending but a call to continue writing our stories, to honour the past while forging a future that embraces the complexity and richness of our identities.

PART TWO

C

The Myth of Desh – Bidesh

**"The search for identity is often a journey toward belonging,
where we find ourselves reflected in the people and places we call home."**

Jibanananda Das

Chapter 6: The Third Generation: Born in the Sceptre'd Isle-Imagining Home?

6.1 Prologue

The concept of desh-bidesh, representing the duality between (home) desh abroad (bidesh), has long been central to the identity formation of the Sylheti Bengali diaspora in the United Kingdom. For the first generation of migrants, desh served as a cultural and emotional anchor, deeply rooted in the landscape, traditions, and memories of Sylhet. This connection to desh shaped both personal and collective cultural and religious identities, linking them to their homeland (Gardner, 1995). In contrast, bidesh symbolised economic opportunities and the challenges of adapting to life in the UK. Early migrants viewed their time in bidesh as temporary, with the hope of returning to desh once they had accumulated enough wealth to secure a better life for their families (Ballard, 1994).

As the Sylheti Bengali community evolved in the UK, the desh-bidesh framework underwent a transformation. The family reunifications of the 1980s blurred the once-clear distinction between desh and bidesh. The second generation grew up in a space where the boundaries between homeland and host country were less defined. For them, desh was no longer solely a physical place but rather a symbol of cultural heritage, while bidesh transitioned into a permanent residence rather than a temporary phase (Gardner, 2002). This generation had to navigate a complex relationship between their cultural origins in desh and their British identity in bidesh, reconciling the traditions of their parents with the realities of life in a multicultural British society. With the emergence of the third generation—British-born Muslims whose identities are shaped by the legacies of migration—the boundaries between desh and bidesh have become even more fluid. For this generation, the clear division between homeland and abroad has given way to a more integrated understanding of identity, where both elements coexist.

The myth of desh-bidesh, which once represented a stark divide, has evolved into a complex and multifaceted narrative of belonging. As Hall (1996) explains, identity is never static but is continually shaped by cultural, social, and historical contexts. For the third generation, desh and bidesh are no longer binary opposites but interwoven facets of a hybrid identity that reflects both their cultural heritage and their experiences in a multicultural British society. For this generation, desh is often more symbolic than experiential. Unlike their grandparents, who had direct ties to Sylhet, and their parents, who may have visited or been born there, the third generation's connection to desh is largely mediated through family stories, cultural practices, and the collective memory of the diaspora (Alexander, 2000). This generational shift has transformed the meaning of desh and bidesh, with desh evolving from a tangible homeland into a symbolic and imagined space.

The third generation's relationship with desh is complex. For some, it represents a source of pride, cultural continuity, and belonging, while for others, it evokes feelings of distance or alienation. The lived experience of bidesh—life in the UK—has become more immediate and real than any connection to desh. As Gilliat-Ray (2010) notes, the symbolic nature of desh can serve as both a source of identity and tension, depending on how individuals engage with their heritage and the realities of life in Britain. Conversely, while bidesh traditionally represented foreignness for the first generation, for the third generation, bidesh is home. Born and raised in the UK, this generation identifies with their British nationality, yet they often face challenges in

terms of belonging and acceptance. The duality of being both British and Muslim frequently leads to experiences of exclusion, particularly in the face of rising Islamophobia, racism, and socio-economic inequalities (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). These challenges complicate their sense of belonging and highlight the ongoing negotiation of identity within the third generation as they balance their British identity with their cultural and religious heritage.

In this way, the desh-bidesh paradigm is redefined by the third generation. It no longer represents a simple dichotomy between homeland and abroad but instead reflects a more layered understanding of identity, shaped by both the legacy of migration and the contemporary realities of life in the UK. As Werbner (2002) argues, the complex relationship between desh and bidesh provides a lens through which third-generation Sylheti Bengalis negotiate their identities, blending cultural heritage with the demands of modern British society.

This chapter explores how the third generation navigates the evolving myth of desh-bidesh, examining how their identities are shaped by both the past and present. Their experiences, informed by the legacies of migration and the socio-political context of contemporary Britain, offer valuable insights into the complexities of identity, belonging, and adaptation in a transnational world. By understanding how this generation negotiates the tensions between desh and bidesh, we can gain a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of identity within the Sylheti Bengali diaspora.

6.2. The Evolving Concept of Desh-Bidesh

For the third generation the concept of desh has evolved into something more symbolic than experiential. Unlike their grandparents, who had direct, lived experiences of Sylhet, or their parents, who may have visited frequently or been born in Sylhet, the third generation's connection to desh is mediated through familial stories, cultural practices, and the collective memory of the diaspora community. This generation's understanding of desh is largely shaped by the cultural narratives passed down, rather than by their own personal engagement with the homeland. According to Alexander (2000), desh becomes more of an imagined or symbolic space rather than a place of direct experience for many third-generation British-born Muslims. While they may participate in cultural traditions rooted in Sylheti heritage, their lived experiences are firmly grounded in the UK.

This symbolic connection to desh is often maintained and reinforced through family narratives, cultural festivals, and community events, which serve to celebrate and sustain Sylheti heritage. However, this connection is also influenced by the realities of growing up in a multicultural and multi-ethnic society, where identity is constantly being negotiated within a complex social framework.

The symbolic nature of desh serves different functions for different individuals. For some, it represents a source of pride, cultural continuity, and a vital link to their roots. For others, however, it may evoke feelings of distance or even alienation, as their personal experiences are more aligned with their British context. This divergence illustrates the multifaceted relationship that the third generation has with their heritage. As Brah (1996) notes, diaspora identities are shaped by the interaction of multiple cultural spaces, resulting in complex and layered forms of belonging.

This is particularly evident among younger generations who engage with their heritage in ways that are both symbolic and practical, depending on their personal and communal contexts. On the other hand, bidesh—which traditionally represented the foreignness of the UK for earlier generations—has, for the third generation, come to signify home. Born and raised in the UK, this

generation has no other country of origin to identify with in a practical sense. Their British identity is central to their self-conception, even as they navigate the complexities of being part of a minority community within a broader national context. However, the concept of bidesh as home does not come without its own challenges.

The third generation often grapples with questions of belonging and acceptance within British society. Gilliat-Ray (2010) explains that the pressures of rising Islamophobia, racism, and socio-economic inequalities complicate their sense of belonging, especially for those who are visibly marked as "other" due to their religious or ethnic background. The duality of being both British and Muslim, for instance, can lead to experiences of exclusion or discrimination, which creates tensions in their identity. These tensions are central to their experience of negotiating identity within a multicultural Britain, where their attachment to bidesh as home must coexist with the realities of marginalisation and exclusion. Thus, then for the third generation, the evolving concepts of desh and bidesh reflect the complexity of identity formation within a transnational and multicultural framework. Desh is no longer a physical place, but a symbolic connection, while bidesh, now viewed as home, is fraught with challenges related to belonging and societal acceptance. These dualities continue to shape the identities of third-generation Sylheti Bengalis as they navigate their place in both British society and within their cultural heritage.

6.3 Contemporary Socio-Political Climate and Its Impact

The identity formation of the third generation of British-born Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage has been deeply influenced by the broader socio-political landscape in the United Kingdom. Over the past few decades, significant events and trends have shaped the lives and identities of Muslim communities, marking a transition from the overt racism faced by earlier generations to the more nuanced and pervasive forms of Islamophobia encountered by the third generation. Key aspects of this socio-political context include the impact of the Salman Rushdie affair, the rise of Islamophobia, economic disparities, and the ongoing challenges of multiculturalism and integration.

One of the pivotal moments that shaped the socio-political environment for British Muslims was the publication of Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses in 1988. As noted by scholars, the novel was perceived by many Muslims as deeply offensive and blasphemous, sparking widespread protests across the Muslim world, including in the UK. The "Rushdie affair" represented a turning point in the public perception of Muslims in Britain and had a lasting impact on the identity and self-perception of British Muslims (McRoy, 2005). According to Parekh (2000), the affair intensified feelings of alienation and marginalisation within Muslim communities, particularly among younger British-born Muslims, who began to see themselves as part of a broader struggle for recognition and respect in an increasingly hostile society.

The Rushdie affair also marked a shift in the public discourse surrounding Muslims in Britain. While earlier generations of South Asian migrants had primarily faced racial discrimination based on ethnicity, the Rushdie affair shifted attention towards religious and cultural identity. Modood (2005) explains that this incident laid the groundwork for the rise of Islamophobia, where suspicion, hostility, and discrimination against Muslims were increasingly based on their religious beliefs rather than just their ethnic backgrounds. This shift has had a long-term impact on the third generation of British-born Muslims, whose identities are now shaped by both their cultural heritage and their experiences of being Muslim in a society that often casts their religion in a negative light.

The rise of Islamophobia in the UK, particularly after 9/11 and 7/7, has further compounded these challenges. British Muslims, including those of Sylheti Bengali heritage, have had to

navigate a socio-political environment where their faith is often seen as incompatible with British values. As Abbas (2005) illustrates, the politicisation of Muslim identity in the aftermath of these events has led many young British Muslims to adopt a more assertive religious identity as a way of resisting marginalisation and reclaiming their place in British society. This development reflects a broader pattern in which third-generation British Muslims use their faith as both a source of personal strength and a tool for communal solidarity in the face of external pressures.

Economic disparities and social inequalities also contribute to the identity formation of the third generation. Many British-born Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage continue to face economic challenges, with higher rates of unemployment and underemployment compared to the national average. These economic barriers are often compounded by issues of social exclusion, which further reinforce feelings of marginalisation and alienation (Modood, 2005). According to Werbner (2002), the socio-economic challenges faced by Muslim communities have led to a greater emphasis on community cohesion, as many Muslims turn to religious and cultural networks for support and solidarity in the face of systemic inequalities.

The broader challenges of multiculturalism and integration are also central to the identity formation of the third generation. While Britain has long prided itself on being a multicultural society, the reality of integration for many British Muslims has been fraught with difficulties. The tension between maintaining cultural and religious traditions and adapting to the expectations of mainstream British society continues to shape the experiences of third-generation Muslims. As Parekh (2000) notes, this balancing act often leads to complex negotiations of identity, where individuals must reconcile the demands of multiple cultural worlds while asserting their place in a society that may question their belonging.

The socio-political climate of the UK, shaped by events such as the Rushdie affair and the rise of Islamophobia, has had a profound impact on the identity formation of third-generation British Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage. Their experiences are marked by the negotiation of cultural hybridity, the politicisation of their religious identity, and the challenges of economic and social marginalisation. These factors have led to the development of a resilient and dynamic Muslim identity that is both shaped by the past and responsive to the contemporary realities of life in the UK.

The experiences of the third generation are shaped by a shift in the nature of discrimination from the overt racism faced by earlier generations to the more pervasive and multifaceted phenomenon of Islamophobia. Whilst the first and second generations of Sylheti Bengali migrants in the UK primarily faced racism based on their ethnicity and skin colour. This racism was often expressed through exclusionary practices in housing, employment, and education, as well as through verbal and physical abuse in public spaces. The rise of far-right groups in the 1970s and 1980s exacerbated these tensions, leading to widespread racial violence and discrimination, particularly in areas with large South Asian communities like Tower Hamlets (Alexander, 2000).

For the third generation, the nature of discrimination has evolved into what is now recognised as Islamophobia. Islamophobia refers to the irrational fear, hatred, or prejudice against Islam and Muslims, often manifesting in discriminatory practices and policies. This shift reflects a broader change in how Muslims are perceived, with religion rather than race becoming the primary marker of difference. The rise of Islamophobia has been particularly pronounced in the post-9/11 and post-7/7 context, where Muslims have been increasingly associated with terrorism and extremism. This association has led to the securitisation of Muslim communities, with

increased surveillance, policing, and public scrutiny. The Prevent strategy, introduced by the UK government as part of its counter-terrorism measures, has been widely criticised for disproportionately targeting Muslim communities and contributing to a climate of fear and suspicion (Awan, 2012).

The shift from racism to Islamophobia has had significant implications for the identity and sense of belonging of third-generation British Muslims. Unlike their parents and grandparents, who were primarily marginalised for their ethnic backgrounds, this generation faces the added burden of religious discrimination. This dual discrimination—based on both race and religion—complicates their identity formation and challenges their sense of belonging in British society. For many, Islamophobia reinforces feelings of alienation and exclusion, as they are made to feel that their religious identity is incompatible with being British. This environment can lead to a defensive assertion of Muslim identity, as young British Muslims seek to resist the negative stereotypes and assert their right to be both fully Muslim and fully British (Modood, 2005).

Economic factors remain a significant influence on the experiences and identities of third-generation British-born Muslims, particularly concerning social mobility and the persistence of economic disparities. Despite progress in educational attainment, British Muslims, especially those of Bangladeshi heritage, continue to face notable challenges in the labour market. According to Heath and Martin (2013), high levels of unemployment and underemployment are prevalent among British Muslims, and many face discrimination in the hiring process, which limits their career prospects and overall social mobility. For third generation, the persistent economic challenges often result in feelings of frustration and disillusionment, especially when they perceive their efforts to succeed being thwarted by systemic barriers. According to research, despite striving for academic and professional success, many face continued obstacles that limit their upward mobility, reinforcing a sense of exclusion from mainstream British society (Heath & Martin, 2013). This lack of social mobility is not only a matter of individual hardship but also contributes to a broader feeling of being marginalized due to their religious and cultural identity.

The intersection of economic disadvantage and cultural identity becomes a central issue for this generation, as they navigate a society where their Muslim identity often becomes a focal point for discrimination. The challenges they face in securing stable employment and achieving economic success amplify the perception that their exclusion is based not only on socio-economic factors but also on their religious and ethnic background. This dynamic can deepen feelings of alienation and lead to a more complex negotiation of identity, as third-generation British Muslims reconcile their sense of belonging with the realities of social and economic marginalization (Modood, 2005).

Education is often seen as a vital avenue for social mobility, and many Muslim families in the UK emphasize the importance of academic success as a means to overcome socio-economic challenges. However, despite these high aspirations, they frequently encounter barriers within the education system. According to Shain (2013), these barriers include discrimination, lower expectations from educators, and insufficient access to academic resources, all of which can impede their ability to fully realise their potential. These obstacles not only limit educational achievement but also contribute to the ongoing economic disparities faced by the community.

The struggle to achieve social mobility in the face of such obstacles has significant implications for identity formation. For some individuals, these challenges foster a sense of resilience and determination, encouraging the development of a strong and assertive identity that emphasizes perseverance. However, for others, these experiences can lead to feelings of frustration and

alienation, particularly when they perceive that their efforts are not recognized or rewarded by the broader society. This tension between aspiration and systemic inequality plays a crucial role in shaping how these young people view their place in British society, influencing their sense of belonging and identity (Modood, 2005).

The UK's approach to multiculturalism and integration has significantly influenced the experiences of third-generation British-born Muslims. In recent years, multiculturalism as a policy has faced increasing criticism, with some arguing that it has contributed to the segregation of communities and the formation of "parallel societies." This critique has been particularly directed at Muslim communities, which are often portrayed as being insular and resistant to integration. According to Modood (2007), these communities have frequently been singled out in public debates for supposedly failing to engage with broader British society.

These criticisms have sparked calls for a renewed focus on integration, framed around the promotion of shared values and social cohesion. The government's push for policies that encourage integration is often tied to the notion that Muslim communities must adopt certain "British values" in order to fully participate in society. However, this approach can be perceived as placing the onus of integration solely on minority communities, rather than addressing the structural inequalities that contribute to their marginalization. This discourse on integration has influenced how third-generation Muslims perceive their place within the UK, as they navigate the tension between maintaining their cultural and religious identities while also being encouraged to assimilate into mainstream society.

For third-generation British-born Muslims, the debates surrounding multiculturalism and integration create a complex and often contradictory environment. These individuals are frequently encouraged to integrate into British society, adopting its values and norms, while simultaneously facing expectations from their families and communities to maintain their cultural and religious identities (Modood, 2007). This dual expectation creates a challenging balancing act, where young British Muslims must navigate their heritage and the pressures of societal conformity. This tension is evident in public discourse, where integration is often framed as a demand for assimilation. Kundnani (2007) critiques the narrative of "integration" as one that frequently requires the abandonment of visible markers of cultural and religious identity, such as wearing the hijab or adhering to halal dietary practices. This framing not only alienates young British Muslims but also positions their dual identity as inherently incompatible with Britishness (Shain, 2013). These pressures are exacerbated by Islamophobic attitudes, which frame Muslim identity as oppositional to "British values" (Poole, 2002).

Evidence from qualitative studies highlights how these dynamics play out in the lived experiences of young Muslims. Dwyer (1999) found that young British Muslim women often experience significant tensions between adhering to cultural and religious norms within their families and engaging with the broader British society. Similarly, Abbas (2005) observed that young Muslims frequently feel their dual identity as British and Muslim is questioned or misunderstood, leading to feelings of alienation.

Despite these challenges, many young British Muslims have turned to identity politics and community activism to assert their identities and challenge these dichotomies. For example, the work of Modood (2007) highlights how third-generation British Muslims engage in activism not just as a form of resistance but as a means to reshape British identity into a more inclusive concept that embraces multiculturalism. This activism is often rooted in a desire to counter negative stereotypes and advocate for a space where being British and Muslim are not seen as mutually exclusive (Runnymede Trust, 2017).

Moreover, the Citizenship Survey (2007-2011) underscores the strong identification many Muslims feel with Britishness while expressing frustration at the lack of societal acceptance of their cultural and religious practices. This dual identification reflects what Hall (1990) describes as "identity as a production," a process of continuous negotiation and adaptation.

Young British Muslims are increasingly rejecting binary conceptions of identity that frame them as either fully British or fully Muslim. Instead, they are embracing fluid and dynamic identities that allow them to be both, drawing on elements of their heritage while actively engaging in broader British society (Vertovec, 2020). This approach not only challenges stereotypes but also contributes to a more nuanced understanding of multiculturalism and belonging in contemporary Britain.

The contemporary socio-political climate, shaped by globalisation, has significantly influenced the ways in which third-generation British-born Muslims connect with the wider world. Digital and social media platforms have emerged as pivotal spaces for identity formation and global engagement. According to Mandaville (2001), globalisation and digital technologies provide young British Muslims with new platforms to express their identity, engage in transnational discourses, and connect with others who share similar experiences. These platforms enable participation in conversations about Islam, social justice, and identity, fostering online communities that transcend national borders and create a sense of transnational belonging.

This dynamic of global connectivity plays a critical role in shaping how third-generation British Muslims perceive their place in the world. Rooted in the UK and identifying as British citizens, they simultaneously see themselves as part of the broader transnational Muslim ummah. This dual orientation often strengthens their religious identity and connection to shared global experiences. As Shain (2013) observes, the ummah concept reinforces a sense of solidarity among Muslims, transcending national identities and highlighting the interconnectedness of global Muslim communities.

However, this transnational connection also complicates their relationship with British society. Global events, such as conflicts involving Muslim-majority countries or high-profile incidents of Islamophobia, influence local perceptions of Muslims in the UK. Hopkins (2018) notes that such events contribute to the "globalisation of Islamophobia," where negative narratives about Muslims in one context amplify discrimination in others. For third-generation British Muslims, these dynamics underscore the complexities of negotiating their identity within local and global contexts.

Globalisation has also facilitated transnational activism and solidarity among young British Muslims. Many engage in global movements for social justice, humanitarian efforts, and advocacy for issues affecting Muslims worldwide. As noted by Birt and Ahmad (2020), this engagement is often driven by a commitment to universal values such as human rights, equality, and social justice. By participating in these movements, third-generation British Muslims assert their identities as both British and Muslim, challenging stereotypes and countering negative perceptions.

The global orientation of third-generation British Muslims disrupts the traditional concept of desh-bidesh, a framework historically used by earlier generations to distinguish between homeland and host country. Instead of being rooted in a single geographical homeland, their identity reflects a multiplicity of connections and affiliations. Vertovec's (2020) notion of "super-diversity" helps explain this phenomenon, highlighting how these individuals navigate

intersecting dimensions of identity, such as ethnicity, religion, and transnational ties, within a globalised context.

The broader socio-political climate in the UK also plays a significant role in shaping the identities of third-generation British-born Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage. The legacy of the Salman Rushdie affair, the rise of Islamophobia, economic disparities, and debates about multiculturalism continue to impact how they see themselves and are perceived by others. Islamophobia, in particular, has created an environment where young British Muslims often feel compelled to defend their religious identity while simultaneously asserting their Britishness (Modood, 2019). This dual expectation can lead to a constant negotiation of identity, where individuals must reconcile the pressures of integration with the desire to maintain cultural and religious traditions. Despite these challenges, many third-generation British Muslims exhibit remarkable resilience and adaptability. Hopkins (2018) highlights how this generation is actively reshaping the narrative around what it means to be both British and Muslim. By engaging in activism, building global networks, and asserting their identities in public and private spheres, they challenge the notion that their dual identities are incompatible.

The third generation's approach to identity moves beyond the binary framework of desh-bidesh. Instead, they embrace a fluid and multifaceted understanding of self that reflects their experiences in a globalised world. They see themselves as both fully British and fully Muslim, rejecting the idea that these identities must exist in opposition. Hall's (1996) theory of identity as a "production" is particularly relevant here, as it conceptualises identity as a dynamic and evolving process shaped by historical, cultural, and social contexts. This fluid approach allows third-generation British Muslims to navigate the complexities of identity in a way that is both rooted in tradition and responsive to contemporary realities. By integrating elements of their Sylheti Bengali heritage with their British upbringing and global Muslim connections, they are redefining what it means to belong in a multicultural society.

The contemporary socio-political climate, shaped by globalisation and other forces, has profoundly impacted the identity formation of third-generation British-born Muslims. These individuals navigate a complex interplay of local and global influences, balancing the pressures of integration with the desire to maintain their cultural and religious identities. Through engagement in activism, the creation of transnational networks, and the assertion of a dynamic, multifaceted identity, they are reshaping the concept of belonging in a multicultural and globalised world.

6.4. Identity (Re)formulation Among Third-Generation British Muslims

The third generation, born in Britain, engage in a complex and dynamic process of identity (re)formulation. Unlike the first generation, who maintained distinct cultural practices rooted in Sylhet, or the second generation, who often experienced cultural dislocation, the third generation navigates a multifaceted cultural landscape where influences from Sylheti, British, and Islamic traditions intersect. This fluid negotiation reflects their unique position in contemporary British society, shaped by globalisation, cultural hybridity, and the evolving socio-political climate.

The identity (re)formulation of third-generation British Muslims is characterised by the negotiation of cultural hybridity. Unlike their grandparents, who upheld traditional Sylheti practices, or their parents, who often faced tension between home and host cultures, the third generation blends cultural influences from their heritage and environment. As Werbner (2002) explains, this hybridity is visible in everyday practices such as language, fashion, food, and social activities. For instance, young British Muslims often combine traditional Sylheti attire

with modern British styles, speak both English and Sylheti, and celebrate religious festivals like Eid alongside participating in mainstream British holidays. This hybridity allows for creativity and self-expression but also introduces challenges. Brah (1996) highlights the tensions arising when young Muslims must navigate the expectations of maintaining familial traditions while adapting to the secular norms of British society. This balancing act often involves negotiating conflicting pressures to honour their cultural heritage and integrate into the broader social fabric.

Religion plays a pivotal role in the identity (re)formulation of this generation, serving as both a personal anchor and a communal framework. Islam provides a sense of resilience and solidarity in the face of societal challenges, including discrimination and marginalisation (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). Young Muslims often turn to their faith for guidance, using it as a lens to interpret their experiences and as a resource for community cohesion. Mandaville (2001) notes that public expressions of Muslim identity have become more prominent among this generation, reflecting a desire to counter negative stereotypes and assert their place in society. This visibility is evident in their participation in religious organisations, activism, and public dialogues about identity and belonging. However, this engagement often requires negotiating tensions between personal religious beliefs and societal expectations, as highlighted by Abbas (2005), who describes the challenges of reconciling Islamic principles with secular British norms.

Globalisation has significantly influenced the identity (re)formulation of third-generation British Muslims, connecting them to the global Muslim Ummah and shaping their sense of self. Through digital media, travel, and transnational networks, they engage with global discourses on Islam, social justice, and identity (Mandaville, 2001). This interconnectedness enables them to participate in global movements and build solidarity with Muslims worldwide, reinforcing their dual sense of belonging. The concept of the ummah serves as a unifying framework, fostering a sense of global Muslim identity that transcends national boundaries. Eade and Garbin (2006) observe that this global orientation challenges traditional desh-bidesh paradigms, offering new ways for young British Muslims to situate themselves within multiple contexts.

In a socio-political climate marked by Islamophobia and negative media portrayals, third-generation British Muslims actively resist and redefine stereotypes. Saeed (2007) highlights their use of creative outlets, activism, and public engagement to counter reductive narratives about Islam and Muslims. This resistance goes beyond correcting misconceptions; it is a deliberate effort to reclaim their identities and assert autonomy in shaping their representation. Alexander (2000) illustrates how young British Muslims create new narratives through cultural production, such as literature, art, and digital media. These narratives offer alternative perspectives, showcasing the diversity and complexity of their lived experiences. This active engagement is an assertion of agency, as young Muslims work to transform societal perceptions while building their own identities.

The identity (re)formulation of third-generation British Muslims underscores the fluidity and adaptability of contemporary identity construction. As Modood (2005) notes, this generation actively navigates the complexities of dual identities—being both British and Muslim—through continuous negotiation and adaptation. Their engagement with religion, cultural hybridity, global networks, and resistance to stereotypes reflects a dynamic and evolving understanding of selfhood. This identity work has broader implications for the Sylheti Bengali and Muslim communities in the UK. The experiences and perspectives of the third generation influence how these communities address issues of identity, belonging, and integration. By embracing hybridity, transnational connections, and a sense of agency, third-generation British Muslims

are shaping not only their own identities but also the collective identity and cohesion of their communities. They challenge traditional notions of desh and bidesh while offering new pathways for understanding and navigating the complexities of multicultural Britain.

6.5. Gendered Perspectives on Identity and Belonging

The identity and sense of belonging among third-generation British Muslims, particularly within the Sylheti Bengali community, are deeply influenced by gendered expectations. Gender serves as a critical lens through which individuals navigate their cultural heritage, societal norms, and the interplay of their Muslim and British identities. These gendered dynamics are shaped by traditional Sylheti cultural values, Islamic teachings, and the socio-political context of contemporary Britain.

For many young women, cultural expectations surrounding modesty, behaviour, and familial obligations are pronounced. These expectations often reflect a confluence of traditional Sylheti values and Islamic principles, which guide the socialisation of girls and young women in the community. According to Dwyer (2000), young Muslim women frequently face pressure to conform to ideals of femininity that emphasise modesty, piety, and the preservation of family honour. These expectations often manifest in the prioritisation of family responsibilities and adherence to cultural norms around behaviour and dress. The hijab is a particularly significant symbol in this context, serving as both a personal expression of faith and a marker of cultural identity. Recent studies, such as those by Tarlo (2010) and Moors (2017), highlight the politicisation of the hijab in Western societies, where it is often interpreted through competing discourses of empowerment, resistance, and subjugation. For many young British Muslim women, wearing the hijab is an act of agency—an assertion of their religious and cultural identity in the face of societal pressures to conform to Western norms.

The experience of third-generation British Muslim women involves navigating the dual demands of their private familial roles and their public engagement with British society. Phillips and Saharso (2008) note that these young women often act as cultural mediators, balancing the expectations of their families with their aspirations for education, career, and social integration. This dual role is particularly challenging given the intersection of Islamophobia, sexism, and cultural stereotyping that many encounter in their daily lives. Public perceptions of Muslim women, often shaped by media portrayals, contribute to these challenges. Studies by Afshar et al. (2005) and Ahmed (2021) highlight how Muslim women are frequently positioned as symbols of cultural difference, with their choices—such as wearing the hijab—scrutinised as markers of loyalty or assimilation.

This scrutiny can reinforce feelings of otherness, even as these women assert their agency and navigate their multifaceted identities. While much of the discourse around gender focuses on women, young Muslim men also face distinct gendered expectations. According to Hopkins (2006), young Muslim men in Britain often grapple with societal stereotypes that portray them as threats or potential extremists. These stereotypes intersect with expectations from their own communities, where traditional notions of masculinity may emphasise being providers and protectors of the family. Young men often feel the dual pressures of fulfilling traditional roles while navigating the realities of life in Britain, where ideals of masculinity may differ significantly from those in their cultural heritage. These tensions can lead to identity struggles, particularly as young men attempt to reconcile their personal aspirations with societal expectations and familial responsibilities.

Despite these challenges, both young women and men within the Sylheti Bengali community exhibit significant agency in negotiating their identities. For women, the hijab and other cultural

practices are not merely markers of tradition but can be reframed as tools of empowerment. As Tarlo (2010) and Ahmed (2021) observe, many young women view their choices as forms of resistance against Islamophobia and cultural erasure, asserting their autonomy and rejecting simplistic narratives imposed by both Western and Muslim communities. Similarly, young men engage in acts of resistance by challenging stereotypes and redefining masculinity in ways that align with both their faith and their experiences in British society. Hopkins (2006) highlights how young Muslim men navigate spaces where they can assert their identities without succumbing to societal pressures or negative stereotypes.

The gendered dynamics of identity and belonging among third-generation British Muslims underscore the complex interplay of cultural heritage, religious values, and societal expectations. For young Sylheti Bengalis, these dynamics reflect broader negotiations of identity within a multicultural Britain. Their experiences illustrate how gender intersects with religion and culture to shape their sense of self and community, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities of navigating these intersecting identities in contemporary society.

6.6. Epilogue

This chapter has examined the multifaceted identities of young British Muslim women, particularly those of Sylheti Bengali heritage, within the broader socio-cultural and political context of contemporary Britain. These women navigate a complex interplay of religious, cultural, gendered, and societal expectations, engaging in a dynamic process of identity negotiation and (re)formulation.

Young British Muslim women often find themselves at the crossroads of diverse influences, balancing the cultural traditions of their Sylheti heritage, the religious obligations of Islam, and the societal norms of British life. This negotiation involves critically engaging with inherited values and practices, resulting in the creation of personalized, multifaceted identities that challenge binary notions of belonging. The concept of intersectionality is crucial for understanding their experiences, as it highlights the overlapping forms of discrimination and privilege they encounter based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and social class (Crenshaw, 1991). These women simultaneously face Islamophobia, sexism, and cultural stereotyping, while also benefiting from the opportunities afforded by education and professional advancement.

The hijab has emerged as a central symbol in the identity formation of many young Muslim women. Beyond being a religious obligation, it serves as a tool for asserting autonomy, resisting societal pressures, and reclaiming agency in the face of discrimination and stereotyping (Tarlo, 2010; Moors, 2017). While the politicisation of the hijab has subjected these women to heightened scrutiny, many embrace it as a visible expression of empowerment and identity. Education and professional aspirations play a pivotal role in shaping the identities of young Muslim women. These women navigate dual pressures—cultural expectations surrounding marriage and family life, and the pursuit of academic and career success.

Despite encountering barriers such as workplace discrimination and challenges in balancing professional and religious commitments, many use their achievements to challenge stereotypes and expand the narrative of what it means to be a Muslim woman in Britain (Gilliat-Ray, 2010; Ahmed, 2021).
Family and community expectations significantly influence identity formation. While these expectations can provide support and a sense of belonging, they may also impose limitations on personal autonomy. Generational differences frequently lead to tensions within families, as

young women strive to assert independence while remaining respectful of cultural and religious traditions. These intergenerational negotiations highlight the evolving nature of cultural identity within the Sylheti Bengali community (Eade & Garbin, 2006).

Young British Muslim women are increasingly active in public and political life, challenging stereotypes, combating Islamophobia, and advocating for social justice. Their activism reflects a transnational dimension of identity, as they connect local struggles with global movements, thereby engaging with issues that resonate across borders. Their participation in activism and advocacy underscores their commitment to shaping the narratives and policies that impact their lives (Saeed, 2007). The identities of young British Muslim women are marked by complexity, resilience, and agency. They navigate the intersections of religion, culture, and gender with creativity and determination, challenging monolithic portrayals of Muslim women in society. Through education, professional careers, activism, and public engagement, they redefine what it means to be a Muslim woman in contemporary Britain while contributing to broader efforts for social justice, equality, and inclusion.

This chapter underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of identity formation among young British Muslim women. By skilfully negotiating multiple identities, they assert their rightful place within their communities and broader British society, creating new pathways for themselves and future generations. Their stories are a testament to the strength of hybridity, the power of agency, and the enduring quest for belonging in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

6.7 Secondary Data Analysis of Third-Generation British-Born Muslim Women of Sylheti Bengali Heritage

The experiences of third-generation British-born Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage offer a rich field for analysis, capturing the interplay between cultural, religious, and national identities within a rapidly evolving socio-political landscape. This section synthesises findings from secondary data sources, including academic studies, government reports, community archives, and oral histories, to explore how these women navigate the complexities of identity formation and belonging.

The role of education in shaping the aspirations and identities of third-generation British Muslim women is well-documented. According to Abbas (2005), young Muslim women increasingly view education as a pathway to personal empowerment and socio-economic mobility. Education also serves as a means of challenging stereotypes, as women from this group excel in academia and enter professional fields traditionally underrepresented by minority groups. Census data and studies by Ahmed (2021) indicate rising numbers of British Muslim women attaining higher education qualifications, particularly in professions like law, healthcare, and education, reflecting their determination to assert themselves in British society.

The dual pressures of preserving cultural heritage and integrating into British society are a recurring theme in the data. Studies by Werbner (2002) and Brah (1996) highlight the hybridity experienced by these women, who seamlessly blend British and Sylheti cultural practices in their daily lives. This hybridity manifests in fashion, language use, and social practices, where they balance traditional expectations with modern, individualised expressions of identity. For example, many young women navigate cultural expectations around modesty and family obligations while simultaneously pursuing professional and social aspirations in a Western context.

Secondary data reveals the critical role of gender in shaping the identity experiences of Sylheti Bengali women. As Dwyer (2000) observes, young women often face stricter cultural expectations than their male counterparts, including heightened emphasis on modesty, family responsibilities, and community reputation. Oral histories collected by community organisations echo these findings, illustrating how generational shifts influence the negotiation of autonomy and cultural expectations. Younger women frequently challenge traditional gender norms by asserting their independence while remaining rooted in their cultural and religious values.

Religion is a central component of identity for third-generation Muslim women, offering both a personal anchor and a communal framework. Gilliat-Ray (2010) notes that many women embrace their religious identity as a source of empowerment and resilience. The hijab, for instance, serves as a multifaceted symbol—representing faith, cultural identity, and resistance to societal pressures. However, the politicisation of the hijab, particularly in the wake of heightened Islamophobia, has subjected these women to scrutiny and discrimination. Despite these challenges, secondary data highlights their active engagement in public life, from grassroots activism to participation in political and social movements, often advocating for issues such as gender equality, anti-racism, and social justice (Saeed, 2007).

Globalisation has enabled young Muslim women to connect with broader transnational networks, reshaping their sense of identity and belonging. Mandaville (2001) discusses how digital platforms and social media have facilitated the formation of online communities where young British Muslims engage in discussions about Islam, identity, and global social justice. These platforms allow women to participate in global conversations, linking their local experiences in the UK with the struggles and triumphs of Muslim women worldwide. This transnational perspective further enriches their identity, creating a sense of solidarity with the global Muslim ummah while remaining rooted in their British upbringing.

The data underscores the resilience of third-generation Muslim women in resisting stereotypes and reclaiming their narratives. Alexander (2000) highlights how these women use creative outlets, such as literature, art, and social media, to challenge monolithic portrayals of Muslim women as oppressed or submissive. By sharing their diverse stories, they redefine what it means to be a British Muslim woman, emphasising agency, diversity, and empowerment. While secondary data provides valuable insights, it has limitations. Much of the available literature focuses on specific aspects of identity, such as religion or education, often overlooking the interplay between various identity dimensions. Furthermore, existing studies may lack intersectional analysis, failing to fully explore how factors like class, ethnicity, and migration history shape the experiences of Sylheti Bengali women. There is also a relative paucity of qualitative research capturing the nuanced, lived experiences of this demographic, highlighting the need for more comprehensive and inclusive studies.

The secondary data analysis of third-generation British-born Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage reveals a complex and dynamic process of identity negotiation. These women navigate cultural hybridity, religious devotion, and societal expectations with resilience and creativity, asserting their place within both their communities and broader British society. Despite facing systemic challenges and societal scrutiny, they continue to redefine what it means to be a Muslim woman in contemporary Britain, drawing on education, activism, and transnational connections to shape their identities and forge new pathways for future generations.

Chapter 7: Raising British Born children of Sylheti Bengali Heritage: Identity, Belonging and choices.

7. 1 Prologue

Identity and belonging are deeply personal yet profoundly social constructs, shaped by an intricate interplay of historical, cultural, political, and religious factors. For British-born Muslims of Bengali heritage, these concepts take on added layers of complexity as they navigate dual cultural contexts—one rooted in the ancestral traditions of desh (home) and the other in the realities of bidesh (abroad). Within this dynamic, identity is not static but constantly evolving, a site of negotiation and adaptation shaped by experiences of migration, diasporic heritage, and the socio-political climate of Britain. For my children's generation, growing up in East London—a space historically tied to Bengali migration and activism—offered a rich cultural tapestry against which to forge their identities. Yet, their journey was also marked by challenges: the persistent questioning of their Britishness, the politicisation of their faith in the post-9/11 and 7/7 era, and the dual perceptions of being viewed as English in Bangladesh but as other in Britain. These experiences, while unique to their time and place, reflect broader themes of identity formation and belonging that resonate across diasporic communities.

This chapter explores the multifaceted identity choices faced by British-born Muslims of Bengali heritage, weaving together personal reflection and theoretical analysis. It examines how they navigate the intersections of cultural and national identities and generational shifts in understanding heritage. By engaging with key theoretical frameworks, such as Stuart Hall's (1990) concept of cultural identity, Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of the third space, and Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969), this chapter seeks to illuminate the dynamic processes through which identity and belonging are constructed, contested, and reimagined. Through an autoethnographic lens, I reflect on how these dynamics have shaped my family's experiences, informed the identity choices I have made, and influenced my parenting style. These decisions, in turn, have significantly impacted the identity journeys of my children, who navigate the intersection of heritage and modernity.

Their stories exemplify the resilience of diasporic identities while providing valuable insights into the broader challenges and opportunities of multicultural belonging in contemporary Britain. This chapter highlights the importance of viewing identity as a fluid, multifaceted construct that transcends rigid boundaries and challenges simplistic notions of cultural or national belonging. It is within this fluidity—where heritage, faith, and modernity converge—that the richness of diasporic identity emerges. By embracing this complexity, we uncover possibilities for a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of belonging, one that reflects the evolving realities of diasporic life in a globalised world.

7.2 Navigating Cultural Identity Across Generations: Continuity, Change, and Belonging

Cultural identity is both a deeply personal and collective experience, shaped by history, family, and social interactions. For members of diasporic communities, this identity is further complicated by the dualities of navigating life between desh and bidesh. This section reflects on these complexities through personal experiences, exploring how identity, belonging, and cultural heritage are negotiated across generations. It also examines the emotional weight of maintaining cultural authenticity while adapting to new cultural landscapes, informed by

theories such as Social Identity Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, and the concept of the third space.

On reflection, I have come to recognise a ritual I unconsciously follow whenever I prepare to visit what I consider home. For me, Tower Hamlets will always be home—not just because my mother still resides in the family house or because most of my siblings live within walking distance of each other, but because it holds an enduring emotional resonance. In the lead-up to these visits, I instinctively assert my Bengali identity in more pronounced ways. This manifests in the way I dress, how I carry myself, and even in subtle gestures that consciously connect me to my cultural roots. This behaviour can be understood through Erving Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management, where individuals adapt their presentation of self-depending on the social context and the perceived expectations of their audience.

In Tower Hamlets, an area steeped in Bengali culture, I feel a need to visibly emphasise my Bengali identity to align with the collective cultural identity of the community. This reflects Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which suggests that individuals derive self-esteem and belonging from their identification with specific social groups. By consciously asserting my Bengali identity, I strengthen my connection to this cultural space and reaffirm my membership within the community. In contrast, in Yorkshire, where the Bengali community is less visible, I feel less compelled to actively perform or assert this identity. Stuart Hall's (1990) theory of cultural identity explains this dynamic, emphasising that identity is shaped by history and context. While my sense of being Bengali remains a constant, the expression of this identity is fluid, influenced by the social and cultural environments I inhabit.

This shift also reflects the concept of the third space (Bhabha, 1994), which describes the hybrid cultural spaces where individuals and communities negotiate their identities. While my mother worked to maintain the cultural boundaries of desh, my approach acknowledges the hybridity of my children's identities, shaped by both their Bengali heritage and their lived experiences in Britain. By placing less emphasis on rigid cultural practices, I have allowed my children to engage with their identity more flexibly, reflecting the generational shifts in how belonging is understood and expressed.

This intergenerational difference also highlights the role of Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969), where identity is formed and reformed through social interactions and the meanings ascribed to them. For my mother, these meanings were rooted in the cultural norms of desh. For me, they are informed by my experiences of navigating desh and bidesh, and for my children, they are shaped by their interactions in a multicultural and dynamic British society. In essence, the transmission of cultural identity in our family reflects both continuity and change, shaped by generational perspectives and the interplay of heritage and context. While my mother's approach sought to safeguard cultural authenticity, my own parenting reflects the adaptive strategies required to navigate a hybrid cultural landscape, where identity is not a static inheritance but an ongoing negotiation.

Even though I can defend my parenting style and deeply believe it to be more appropriate for my children in the context of their lives, there remains a small, persistent feeling of doubt and guilt. This feeling, often unbidden, surfaces at unexpected moments. It seems that I have inherited the burden of cultural authenticity—a responsibility to uphold the traditions, values, and identity of my heritage. As I have mentioned in a previous chapter, I am the serang's nathin (granddaughter). One might assume that it was my father who placed the greatest emphasis on preserving our Bengali identity, given that his father, my dada (paternal grandfather), was the serang whose reputation and legacy carried such weight within our family. Although dada

travelled the world as a serang (native boatswain) in the British merchant navy, his values were deeply rooted in Bengali culture. His character, principles, respect for others, fairness, commitment to his family, and connection to his home exemplified what it meant to be a good Bengali man. As the eldest of his grandchildren, I inherited not only the admiration for these traits but also the implicit responsibility to ensure that my life upheld these values and principles, thereby preserving his legacy. This sense of obligation was further compounded by the legacy of my maternal uncles, who played prominent roles in the Bangladesh Liberation War. Their activism added to the weight of the expectation that I, too, must remain true to my Bengali heritage.

The question that haunts me is this: have I betrayed these expectations through my parenting choices? Reflection and reason tell me that I have not. My children are grounded, thoughtful, and carry aspects of their heritage with them, even if these are expressed differently than they were in my own upbringing. Yet, the nagging feeling of guilt persists, raising deeper questions about the intergenerational transmission of identity and the complexities of cultural authenticity. Another salient factor contributing to this burden of cultural authenticity is the climate of racism in which I was raised. A life-altering racist attack on my father profoundly affected our family dynamics and reshaped the trajectory of my life. Beyond this traumatic event, my family faced and resisted everyday racism simply for being brown. Growing up in this environment, I often found myself in a position where I had to defend my Bengali identity.

In a hostile and exclusionary setting, my sense of being Bengali took on heightened prominence—it became both a source of resilience and a form of resistance. This prominence aligns with Social Identity Theory, which posits that group membership provides a sense of belonging and self-esteem, especially in the face of external hostility (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Defending my identity became an act of asserting my place within the Bengali community, a counterpoint to the exclusion imposed by the broader society. In this context, my Bengali identity was not just inherited but actively forged as a form of cultural pride and defiance. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space highlights how cultural identity is negotiated in hybrid contexts. In the face of exclusion, asserting Bengali identity created a cultural space where I could navigate belonging on my own terms. This hybrid space allowed me to maintain my cultural authenticity while resisting external pressures to conform or assimilate.

The journey of navigating cultural identity across generations is one of negotiation, adaptation, and resilience. For diasporic families, this process involves balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with the realities of life in a new context. While the tensions between tradition and adaptation may create moments of doubt, they also reflect the creative possibilities of cultural hybridity and the enduring strength of belonging.

I witnessed a profound turning point—a shift from defending our Bengali-ness to defending our Muslim-ness. This period marked a transformation in our cultural identity, adding a new layer of complexity and depth. Living in Tower Hamlets during this time, I observed how being a "good Bangali" (Bengali) came to encompass not just cultural pride but also an active assertion of one's identity as a Mussulman (Muslim). This gradual assertion of religious identity brought about significant changes in our community and family life. For instance, my mother, who had always worn traditional sarees, transitioned to wearing long maxi dresses at home and a burkha when outside. My father resisted these shifts initially, but some of his friends—whom I called uncles—adopted visible markers of Islamic identity, such as growing beards and replacing their Western-style shirts with tunics. Other cultural practices were also re-evaluated. Music, once a cherished part of our family life, was deemed inappropriate by some.

My father, who had inherited a record player and an extensive collection of records from my dada (paternal grandfather), bundled them up and stored them away. The melodies that had once filled our home were replaced with a quieter, more reflective atmosphere.

These visible and behavioural shifts align with the broader transformations observed among British Muslim communities in East London. Rajina (2018) highlights how dress, in particular, became a significant medium for articulating identity in the post-9/11 and 7/7 socio-political climate. For many British Muslims, especially women, adopting Islamic attire such as the hijab or burkha was not only a religious expression but also a form of resistance against Islamophobia and negative stereotyping. Rajina's exploration of dress practices underscores how clothing serves as a site where cultural and religious identities are negotiated, blending heritage with contemporary realities.

Similarly, these changes resonate with Stuart Hall's (1990) concept of cultural identity as a process that is constantly evolving, shaped by historical and socio-political contexts. The shift I witnessed was not merely a personal transformation but a collective response to the external pressures faced by our community. The emphasis on religious identity reflected the community's efforts to assert their presence and resilience in a society increasingly scrutinising Muslim identities.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity also resonates here, as these changes reflect how identities are negotiated within the third space, where cultural and religious elements merge and adapt to new realities. For example, while the shift toward Islamic attire and practices marked a departure from some traditional Bengali customs, it also represented a blending of cultural pride and religious affirmation, creating a hybrid identity that could navigate both desh and bidesh. For me, this transformation underscored how identity is never static; it is a dynamic interplay of history, culture, and faith. The shift from asserting Bengali-ness to incorporating Muslim-ness reveals how external socio-political forces can redefine the markers of belonging and reshape the way communities see themselves. This dual assertion of identity became a hallmark of my upbringing and continues to inform how I understand and navigate my sense of self.

7.4 The Salman Rushdie Affair: The Turning Point

The Salman Rushdie affair of 1988-1989 was that turning point and marked a transformative moment for British Muslims, including the Bengali community in Tower Hamlets. While earlier struggles centred on racial discrimination, this event shifted public attention toward religion, framing Muslims as a distinct and often homogenous group (Abbas, 2005). The widespread protests against The Satanic Verses intensified the visibility of Islamic identity and placed new pressures on younger generations to reconcile their cultural heritage with the increasing politicisation of their faith (Modood, 2019). For me, this period profoundly deepened my understanding of the duality of identity, particularly the interplay of desh and bidesh. In Tower Hamlets, desh was more than a geographical connection—it symbolised a cultural and emotional anchor amidst a rapidly changing socio-political environment. This sense of duality aligns with Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space, a dynamic site where hybrid identities are negotiated and reimagined. As a young Bengali Muslim, I inhabited this space, balancing cultural pride in my Bengali roots with a growing awareness of my Islamic identity as both a marker of belonging and a form of resistance (Gilliat-Ray, 2010).

Reflecting on this period, I recognise how it influenced my approach to identity and belonging for my children. The intense scrutiny of Muslims during and after the Rushdie affair reinforced my desire to ensure that my children viewed Tower Hamlets as home, that their claim to being

British Muslims was valid and unshakable. However, this focus on fostering their sense of belonging within Britain may have inadvertently shifted my attention away from emphasising their Bengali heritage (Alexander, 2004).

This emphasis on asserting a strong British Muslim identity shaped my children's perceptions of identity and belonging in significant ways. By prioritising their connection to Britain and Islam, I may have influenced them to view these aspects of their identity as primary, with their Bengali heritage taking a secondary role. This could be seen in their cultural practices, language use, and social circles, where the markers of Bengali culture might have been less visibly present than their religious and national identities. Stuart Hall's (1990) notion of cultural identity as a continuous process shaped by context and history resonates here, as my children's identities were inevitably shaped by the socio-political pressures and narratives of the time.

The consequence of this on their sense of belonging has been multifaceted. On one hand, their strong British Muslim identity has likely provided them with a sense of solidarity and resilience within the broader Muslim community, enabling them to navigate societal challenges such as Islamophobia. On the other hand, the relative de-emphasis on their Bengali heritage may have created a sense of cultural disconnect or a diminished connection to their ethnic roots. This aligns with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which posits that group membership contributes to self-esteem and a sense of belonging. By not equally emphasising their Bengali identity, I may have inadvertently limited their sense of belonging to the cultural in-group of Bengalis in Britain.

This duality reflects the broader challenges of diasporic identity formation, where the need to navigate multiple cultural affiliations can create both opportunities and tensions. While my children have embraced a strong sense of British Muslim identity, their understanding of Bengali heritage may be more symbolic than experiential. This raises important questions about how cultural transmission occurs across generations and the extent to which identity and belonging are shaped by the choices of previous generations. Ultimately, this dynamic underscore the complexity of identity formation within diasporic families. While my approach to fostering a sense of belonging for my children in Britain was rooted in the socio-political realities of the time, it also reflects the ongoing negotiation of heritage, religion, and national identity. As they continue to navigate their identities, their choices and perceptions will likely evolve, influenced by their own experiences and the changing cultural landscape in which they live.

7.5 Post-9/11 and 7/7: From Racism to Islamophobia

I vividly remember the frantic call from my mother on July 7, 2005. Her voice trembled as she asked, "Where are you? Do you know where your siblings are?" There had been an explosion near Aldgate, just a five-minute walk from my parents' house. Aldgate and Aldgate East were our local tube stations, routes we used regularly. The London bombings that day struck uncomfortably close to home, both geographically and emotionally. My mother's tone that morning carried the same urgency I remembered from years earlier, when she urged me to find the ambulance that had taken my father after the racist attack during my childhood, discussed previously in chapter (?)

The events of September 11, 2001, and the London bombings of July 7, 2005, marked a pivotal moment, reinforcing and amplifying the shift that began during the Salman Rushdie affair, in the identity landscape for British Bengali Muslims. Previously, racism had predominantly targeted skin colour and ethnicity, but this period saw a pronounced transition to Islamophobia, with discrimination now centering on religion and visible markers of Islamic identity such as the hijab and beards (Kundnani, 2014). This shift redefined how British Bengali Muslims were perceived

and how they navigated their sense of belonging within a society increasingly fixated on their faith. Policies like Prevent, introduced as part of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy, further stigmatised Muslim communities, embedding the perception of Muslims as security threats into societal and institutional frameworks (Awan, 2012). These policies intensified the scrutiny on Muslim communities, creating a climate of fear and suspicion. For my children, growing up in a post-9/11 world, these dynamics profoundly shaped their sense of self.

While I had grown up defending my Bengali-ness against racial hostility, my children were navigating the complexities of being visibly Muslim in an era of heightened suspicion and having to defend their Muslim-ness. Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) offers a lens to understand how these external perceptions shaped their internal identity formation. Public interactions—whether in schools, workplaces, or everyday life—became microcosms of broader societal dynamics, where their identities were both contested and reaffirmed. Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management is particularly relevant here, as my children, like many young Muslims, learned to manage how they presented themselves to mitigate risks while asserting their identities.

This period also highlights the intergenerational transmission of cultural trauma. My mother's reaction to the London bombings echoed her response to my father's earlier racial attack, underscoring the continuity of vulnerability faced by diasporic families. However, the nature of this trauma evolved, with Islamophobia replacing overt racism as the dominant force. Jeffrey Alexander's (2004) concept of cultural trauma explains how collective experiences of marginalisation become embedded in a community's identity, influencing how both individuals and families respond to new forms of exclusion.

For my children, these challenges also shaped their understanding of desh and bidesh. While I maintained a tangible connection to desh through family visits and cultural practices, for them, desh has become more symbolic—a representation of heritage rather than a lived reality. This shift reflects Stuart Hall's (1990) notion of cultural identity as a continuous process shaped by history, context, and the lived experiences of each generation. Also, Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space offers additional insight into the hybrid identities my children inhabit. This conceptual space allowed them to reconcile their Bengali heritage with their Islamic faith and British upbringing, navigating the dual pressures of belonging to a global Muslim community and a specific cultural lineage.

For my children, being British Muslims of Bengali heritage meant negotiating a complex interplay of identities that were often viewed as contradictory in the broader societal narrative. The Islamophobic climate that followed 9/11 and 7/7 not only reshaped public perceptions of Muslims but also influenced the identity choices of younger generations. The prioritisation of Muslim identity as a response to societal scrutiny sometimes overshadowed ethnic heritage, reflecting the shifting dynamics of belonging. While this emphasis on religious identity provided a sense of solidarity within the global ummah, it also raised questions about the preservation of cultural specificity.

For my children, navigating this climate meant engaging with their identity in ways that reflected both resilience and adaptation. Transnationalism (Glick Schiller et al., 1992) provides a framework for understanding how diasporic communities maintain connections to their cultural heritage while responding to the pressures of their host society. Their connection to desh was mediated through symbols, stories, and practices rather than direct lived experiences, illustrating how transnational ties evolve across generations.

The post-9/11 and 7/7 period marked a critical juncture for British Bengali Muslims, transforming the nature of discrimination from racism to Islamophobia and redefining the boundaries of identity and belonging.

This era was formative, shaping how my children and others of their generation understood and expressed their identities as British Muslims of Bengali heritage. While I defended my cultural roots and fought against the racialised hostility of my time, my children inherited a different struggle: reconciling their faith and identity in an Islamophobic climate. This duality, shaped by history, societal pressures, and intergenerational trauma, underscores the resilience of diasporic communities in navigating the complexities of identity in a changing world.

7.6 Born within the sound of the Bow Bells.

All four of my children were born at the Royal London Hospital, a location steeped in the rich history of East London. This hospital, within hearing distance of the Bow Bells, carries a unique cultural significance tied to London folklore. According to this tradition, a person is considered a true Eastender—a Cockney—if they are born within the sound of the Bow Bells, which ring from the Church of St. Mary-le-Bow. This iconic church, located in the heart of the East End, houses one of the most renowned sets of bell chimes in the world, their sound carrying with it a storied legacy of East London identity and heritage. For my children, this connection to East London is more than a geographical marker; it is an integral part of their identity. Being an "Eastender," as they proudly describe themselves, reflects a deep attachment to the cultural and social fabric of the area.

East London, with its vibrant history of working-class resilience, immigrant communities, and multicultural dynamism, shapes their sense of self in profound ways. Their pride in being Eastenders can be understood through the lens of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which posits that group membership plays a critical role in fostering self-esteem and a sense of belonging. Identifying as Eastenders not only ties them to a specific place but also aligns them with the shared cultural identity of a community known for its strength, adaptability, and resourcefulness. This identity carries with it the legacy of generations who have lived, worked, and thrived in the East End, despite often facing social and economic challenges.

Additionally, their connection to East London underscores the interplay of place-based identity and cultural heritage. As Doreen Massey (1994) argues, places are not merely geographic locations but are imbued with layers of meaning, shaped by the experiences and interactions of those who inhabit them. For my children, the Royal London Hospital and the Bow Bells are not just physical landmarks but symbols of their connection to a broader cultural and historical narrative. Their pride in being an Eastender reflects an awareness of belonging to a place with a unique identity that extends beyond its borders. At the same time, this aspect of their identity interacts with their Bengali heritage, creating a hybrid sense of self that incorporates both their East London roots and their cultural ancestry. This dynamic resonates with Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space, where individuals negotiate and blend multiple cultural influences to create new, hybrid identities. Being Eastenders does not diminish their Bengali identity but instead enriches it, adding another layer to their multifaceted sense of belonging.

In a rapidly changing urban landscape, where gentrification and social shifts threaten to dilute traditional East End identities, their pride in being Eastenders also serves as a form of cultural continuity. It connects them to a community history that values resilience, solidarity, and diversity. This pride is not only a personal affirmation but also a reflection of their connection to the collective identity of East London—a community that has historically embraced the contributions of migrant populations like the Sylheti Bengalis while maintaining its distinct

character. Thus, their East London identity, symbolised by their birth within the sound of the Bow Bells, is a testament to the enduring power of place, culture, and community in shaping who we are. For my children, being Eastenders is not merely a label; it is a source of pride, a cultural anchor, and a meaningful aspect of their evolving identities.

Another certainty my children embraced regarding their identity was their unwavering connection to being Muslim. Their faith and commitment to it remain steadfast, and each of them confidently articulates their relationship with Islam in their own way. In many respects, guiding them in matters of faith felt less fraught than navigating cultural guidance. The complexities I inherited around what it means to be Bengali often left me grappling with my own understanding of that identity. For my children, however, being Muslim East Londoners of Bengali heritage served as clear markers of their identity—anchors they could navigate with confidence. These identities, though interconnected, offered distinct avenues for self-expression and belonging, allowing them to weave their own paths while acknowledging their roots.

7.8 Identity and Choices: An Analysis

Identity and belonging for British-born Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage are multifaceted and fluid, shaped by historical, cultural, political, and religious influences. For my children and their generation, these dynamics manifest as they navigate their place within British society while maintaining connections to their heritage and faith. This section examines the complexity of identity through five key lenses: the distinction between English and British, the negotiation of Bengali versus Bangladeshi identity, the influence of Bangladeshi politics, the interplay between being Bengali Muslim and Muslim, and the dual perceptions of identity in Britain and Bangladesh.

English vs. British

For my children, the distinction between identifying as English or British has been central to their understanding of identity and belonging. While British encompasses a multicultural and multi-ethnic national identity, English often carries exclusionary undertones, linked to whiteness and cultural homogeneity (Modood, 2007). Growing up in East London—a hub of diversity—my children felt more comfortable identifying as British, which aligned with their lived experiences of multiculturalism. However, their Britishness was frequently questioned, particularly through the recurring, intrusive question, "Where are you really from?" This question, while seemingly benign to the questioner, was a stark reminder that their Britishness was conditional in the eyes of others. For my children, asserting their British identity became an act of resistance and self-affirmation. Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) helps illuminate how these encounters shaped their self-concept. Everyday interactions in schools, workplaces, and public spaces became sites where their identities were both affirmed and contested, highlighting the relational and dynamic nature of identity formation.

I remember one instance when my eldest daughter returned from school frustrated after a classmate questioned her claim to being British. "You can't be British if you're brown," the child had said. For her, this was a moment of reckoning, forcing her to articulate her understanding of Britishness in opposition to such narrow definitions. Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management further explains how my children navigated these moments, adapting how they presented themselves depending on the audience. This distinction between British and English also underscores Stuart Hall's (1990) argument that cultural identity is not fixed but shaped by history and context. For my children, Britishness represented inclusion and belonging in a multicultural society, while Englishness felt alien and exclusionary. Their rejection of

Englishness was not an abandonment of national pride but a strategic distancing from an identity that did not resonate with their lived realities.

Bengali vs. Bangladeshi

The tension between identifying as Bengali or Bangladeshi reflects another layer of complexity in my children's identity formation. The term Bengali emphasises cultural and linguistic heritage, rooted in the Bengal region's shared history, while Bangladeshi carries a national and political connotation tied to Bangladesh's independence in 1971 (Gardner & Shukur, 1994). For the first generation of migrants, identifying as Bengali was a natural extension of their cultural practices, including language, food, and traditions.

However, as a second-generation British Bengali, I observed how the term Bangladeshi gained prominence during my youth. This shift was partly a response to the racialised categorisation of South Asians in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s, as the Bangladeshi label offered political visibility and differentiation from other South Asian groups (Alexander, 2004). For my children, born and raised in Britain, the distinction between Bengali and Bangladeshi is often blurred. In private spaces, they might refer to themselves as Bengali, connecting with the cultural narratives passed down through our family. In public and institutional contexts, however, Bangladeshi becomes the default label, reflecting how identity is shaped by external categorisations. This duality aligns with the desh-bidesh paradigm, where desh symbolises cultural heritage and bidesh represents the socio-political realities of life in Britain (Gardner, 2002).

The Impact of Bangladeshi Politics

The political history of Bangladesh, from its 1971 Liberation War to its present-day complexities, has left an indelible mark on the identities of British Bengalis, both at home and abroad. For my children, the stories of liberation passed down from my maternal uncles, who were active participants in the war, form a critical part of their understanding of heritage. These narratives emphasise resilience, justice, and collective identity, instilling pride in their connection to Bangladesh. The tales of struggle and triumph against oppression serve as a foundational element of their cultural identity, symbolising the sacrifices made to ensure independence and self-determination (Hussain & Baguley, 2012; Ahmed, 2021).

However, this pride is tempered by the ongoing challenges of contemporary Bangladeshi politics, including political instability, corruption, and the shift from a secular constitution to one emphasising religious identity. Bangladesh represents both an inspiring legacy and a complex national reality. Their connection to the country is filtered through family stories, media portrayals, and infrequent visits, highlighting the duality of their relationship with desh—one rooted in pride and nostalgia, yet tinged with the dissonance of modern political realities (Kabir, 2020).

Bangladesh's journey from a secular constitution at its inception in 1971 to a nation increasingly emphasising religious identity has had far-reaching consequences, both domestically and within the diaspora. The secular ideals enshrined in the constitution after independence were intended to foster unity in a country born from the struggle against West Pakistan's religious and cultural hegemony (Karim, 2018). These ideals emphasised equality and pluralism, aligning with the aspirations of many who had fought for liberation, including members of my family. However, over the decades, political shifts have altered this foundation. The formal amendment of the constitution in 1988, declaring Islam as the state religion, marked a significant turning point (Hussain & Baguley, 2012).

This change was not merely symbolic; it reflected a broader societal transformation in which religion became increasingly central to national identity. For the diaspora, including British Bengalis, this shift complicated their perception of Bangladesh, introducing new layers to the already intricate dynamics of cultural and religious identity (Kabir, 2020). For British Bengali Muslims, the shift toward a more religiously defined national identity in Bangladesh has had nuanced consequences. On the one hand, it has fostered a sense of solidarity within the global Muslim ummah, reinforcing connections between faith and heritage. For my children, this alignment with Islam has made it easier to connect with certain aspects of Bangladeshi identity, particularly as they navigate their own religious identities in Britain (Eade & Garbin, 2006).

On the other hand, this shift has also created tensions. The emphasis on religion in Bangladesh's politics has sometimes overshadowed the rich cultural and linguistic traditions that define Bengali identity. For diaspora communities, including my children, this poses a challenge: how to balance pride in their Bengali heritage with the increasingly prominent role of religious identity in Bangladesh's national narrative (Vertovec, 2009). This complexity is reflected in Stuart Hall's (1990) theory of cultural identity, which emphasises that identity is not fixed but shaped by historical and contextual factors. For my children, their engagement with Bangladeshi politics—or lack thereof—reflects a balancing act between pride in their heritage and the dissonance of a country they know primarily through family stories and media portrayals. The romanticised narratives of liberation passed down from one generation contrast sharply with the contemporary realities of political instability, corruption, and societal polarisation in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2021).

Within Bangladesh, the emphasis on religious identity has had significant implications for social cohesion, minority rights, and political dynamics. The shift has often marginalised religious minorities, such as Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians, undermining the pluralistic vision that many liberation fighters, including members of my family, had envisioned (Karim, 2018). It has also fuelled political polarisation, with rival factions using religion as a tool to consolidate power and discredit opponents.

The effects of these shifts are felt acutely by those who still reside in Bangladesh, including extended family members. I recall conversations with relatives who expressed frustration at how religious politics have overshadowed pressing socio-economic issues, such as poverty and education. For them, the emphasis on religious identity is both a distraction from and a contributor to the challenges facing the nation.

For my children, Bangladesh remains a complex symbol of heritage and identity. While they take pride in the stories of resilience and liberation, the contemporary political realities complicate their relationship with desh. Their engagement with Bangladesh's politics often feels distant, shaped more by family narratives than direct experience. This distance underscores the evolving nature of diasporic identity, where connections to the homeland are mediated by memory, storytelling, and selective engagement (Vertovec, 2009). The shift from secularism to religious identity in Bangladesh highlights the interplay between history, politics, and identity for British Bengali Muslims. It underscores the duality of desh as both an inspiring legacy and a complicated reality, reflecting the ongoing negotiation of identity within the diaspora. For my children and their generation, navigating this duality is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of diasporic identities, shaped by both pride in their heritage and the challenges of contemporary political realities.

For British Bengalis, the experience of being caught between two perceptions—seen as English in Bangladesh and as other in Britain—further complicates their identity. These contrasting

perceptions illuminate the fluidity and relational nature of identity, where belonging is continually negotiated. When visiting Bangladesh, the label Bilati (foreigner) or Londoni (from London, irrespective of one's actual residence in Britain) is often used by relatives and locals. These terms, though sometimes spoken affectionately, highlight the perception of British Bengalis as outsiders. Accents, mannerisms, and a perceived unfamiliarity with local customs are frequently pointed out, serving as subtle reminders of their foreignness.

I vividly recall a moment during one of our trips to Bangladesh when a relative, in a playful tone, remarked on my children's attempts to speak Sylheti, saying, "You need to sound more like you're one of us." Although intended as light-hearted, the comment carried an undercurrent that stung. It underscored the divide between our lived reality in Britain and the expectations of cultural fluency held by our family in Bangladesh. This moment highlights Stuart Hall's (1990) concept of cultural identity as a process of becoming, continuously shaped by history, context, and social interactions.

In Bangladesh, my children's identity as British Bengalis is often filtered through the lens of their upbringing abroad, with their differences foregrounded over their shared heritage. Despite their genuine desire to connect with their roots, they are frequently perceived as outsiders—guests or visitors rather than true kin. This duality reflects the complexities of navigating identity across transnational spaces, where belonging is both relational and fluid. Conversely, in Britain, my children's Britishness is frequently questioned. Microaggressions, such as the ubiquitous question, "Where are you really from?" challenge their claim to a British identity, framing them as perpetual outsiders. This experience reflects Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969), which explains how identity is shaped by interactions and the meanings ascribed to them. While in Bangladesh, my children grapple with being perceived as too English; in Britain, they must navigate a landscape where their Britishness is conditional and subject to scrutiny.

I recall an incident when my daughter returned from school upset after a teacher commented, "You're so well-spoken for someone from East London." She later told me, "It's like no matter what I do, I'm never just British. There's always an asterisk." These moments of exclusion became a recurring theme in their lives, where they had to assert their belonging while feeling excluded from the mainstream definition of British identity.

On one of our family trips to Bangladesh, my children expressed this tension perfectly. While sitting in my ancestral home, one of them remarked, "It's funny, isn't it? Over here, we're too English. Over there, at home, in Britain, we're considered not English at all." Their words captured the essence of this dual perception, encapsulating the liminality of their identity. For me, as a second-generation British Bengali, these observations struck a chord. I had grown up navigating similar tensions, but hearing my children articulate their experiences so vividly reinforced how these dynamics persist across generations. It also underscored how the concept of desh and bidesh continues to evolve. For my children, desh is more symbolic, representing heritage and family connections, while bidesh is home, where they build their lives, yet without full acceptance. These lived experiences highlight the challenges of belonging in two worlds while fully fitting into neither. Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of the third space offers a lens through which to understand this duality. Within this hybrid space, my children navigate and negotiate their identities, blending elements of Britishness and Bengali heritage into something uniquely their own.

Bengali Muslim vs. Muslim

Perhaps the most intricate negotiation for my children has been the interplay between being Bengali Muslim and Muslim. While earlier generations often identified as Bengali Muslims,

emphasising cultural and linguistic roots, younger generations increasingly foreground their religious identity as Muslim.

This shift reflects broader trends among British Muslims, who respond to Islamophobia and the politicisation of Muslim identity by prioritising faith as a unifying marker (Modood, 2019). For my children, being Muslim provides a sense of solidarity within the global ummah, offering a collective identity that transcends national and ethnic boundaries. At the same time, their Bengali heritage remains an integral part of their identity, manifested in family traditions, language, and cultural practices. Transnationalism (Glick Schiller et al., 1992) helps explain how these dual identities are maintained and negotiated across cultural and geographical boundaries.

7.9 Epilogue

For British-born Muslims of Bengali heritage, identity and belonging are dynamic, multifaceted processes shaped by the intersection of historical, cultural, political, and religious forces. These identities are not static constructs but evolving narratives that reflect the challenges and opportunities of living between worlds. The negotiation between identifying as English or British, reconciling cultural and national identities as Bengali or Bangladeshi, and navigating the dual perceptions of being seen as English in Bangladesh yet as other in Britain highlights the complexity of their lived realities.

My children's generation exemplifies remarkable resilience and adaptability in navigating these tensions. They have carved out identities that honour their heritage while engaging meaningfully with the contemporary realities of their environment. The influence of Bangladeshi politics, the shift from prioritising a Bengali Muslim identity to a more universal Muslim identity, and the challenges of hybrid belonging illustrate the delicate balance diasporic communities must maintain. These experiences underscore the dynamic interplay between cultural continuity and the fluidity of identity in an increasingly multicultural and globalised context.

Gender further complicates and enriches this dynamic. With three of my four children being girls, their journeys of identity and belonging are marked by additional layers of complexity. As young Muslim women of Bengali heritage, they navigate cultural expectations, religious visibility, and societal perceptions in ways distinct from their male counterparts. The hijab, for instance, becomes both a symbol of faith and a marker of difference, reflecting their negotiation of identity in a post-9/11 world. Their experiences highlight how gender intersects with culture and religion to shape unique pathways of belonging, resilience, and self-expression.

Despite the challenges, I am continually inspired by the strength demonstrated by my children and their peers. Their ability to inhabit liminal spaces, to assert their faith and heritage, and to forge unique identities speaks to the transformative potential of diasporic identity. They are not simply reconciling contradictions but actively reimagining what it means to belong in a world that often demands singular definitions.

This journey is a testament to the resilience of diasporic communities, revealing how they thrive not in spite of their complexities, but because of them. It underscores the power of identity as a vehicle for resistance, self-expression, and belonging—offering a vision of a future where multiplicity is celebrated rather than questioned. The stories of my children remind us that identity is not a singular narrative but a rich, evolving tapestry of histories, cultures, and choices—a tapestry that grows more intricate and vibrant with each generation. Through this fluidity lies the richness of diasporic identity and the potential for a more inclusive

understanding of belonging, one that embraces complexity as its strength and diversity as its foundation.

PART THREE

Discussion

Chapter 8: Discussion

8.1 Prologue

This chapter provides a comprehensive discussion of the findings presented in the previous chapters, situating them within the broader theoretical and empirical literature on identity formation, intersectionality, and cultural hybridity. The chapter aims to synthesise the key insights gained from the research, reflect on their implications, and explore the contributions of the study to existing knowledge.

Furthermore, it addresses the limitations of the research and suggests avenues for future exploration. The discussion begins by revisiting the research questions, aims and objectives to contextualise the findings within the original purpose of the study. It then delves into the key themes that have emerged from the analysis, examining how these themes contribute to our understanding of the identity formation processes among third-generation British Muslims, particularly young women of Sylheti Bengali heritage. This discussion also engages with the broader socio-political context, considering how external factors such as Islamophobia, multiculturalism, and the politicisation of religious identity influence these processes.

A critical reflection on the methodological approach—specifically the use of autoethnography—is also included, evaluating its strengths and limitations in the context of this research. The chapter concludes by considering the practical implications of the study and offering recommendations for future research, aiming to provide a holistic understanding of the complexities involved in the identity (re)formation of young British Muslims.

The overarching goal of this discussion is to articulate how the findings of this study enhance our comprehension of the dynamic and multifaceted nature of identity among third-generation British Muslims, and how these insights can inform both academic discourse and practical interventions in multicultural societies. Thus, the essential purpose of this chapter is to critically evaluate the findings of this research, reflect on the implications of the study, and consider the broader contributions it makes to our understanding of identity formation among third-generation British Muslims, particularly young women of Sylheti Bengali heritage. This discussion also addresses the limitations of the study and suggests potential directions for future research.

This research has illuminated several key aspects of identity formation among third-generation British Muslims, offering insights into how these individuals navigate the complex interplay of religion, culture, gender, and socio-political context. The findings challenge simplistic or monolithic representations of Muslim identity and highlight the dynamic, multifaceted nature of identity (re)formation in contemporary Britain.

One of the central findings of this research is the fluidity and intersectionality of identities among young British Muslims. Unlike previous generations, who might have experienced identity as a more static or binary construct (e.g., between desh and bidesh), the third generation demonstrates a more nuanced approach to identity. They do not simply choose between their British, Muslim, and Sylheti identities; instead, they negotiate and integrate these aspects in complex ways that reflect their lived experiences. This finding underscores the importance of considering the multiple, intersecting dimensions of identity—such as gender, religion, and ethnicity—in any analysis of contemporary identity formation (Crenshaw, 1991; Mirza, 2013).

The intersectionality of these identities is particularly evident in the experiences of young Muslim women, who navigate overlapping pressures related to gender, religion, and cultural expectations. This highlights the need for more nuanced, intersectional analyses in both academic research and public discourse to better understand the diverse experiences within Muslim communities.

The Role of Religion in Identity (Re)Formation: Religion, specifically Islam, plays a pivotal role in the identity formation of third-generation British Muslims. However, the role of religion is not uniform or unidimensional. For many, Islam provides a sense of community, moral guidance, and continuity with their heritage. At the same time, religious identity is also shaped by external factors, including societal perceptions, political debates, and experiences of Islamophobia. The hijab, for example, emerges as a significant symbol that encapsulates the personal and political dimensions of religious identity. It is both a marker of faith and a site of resistance against secular pressures and Islamophobic attitudes (Ameli et al., 2007; Tarlo, 2010).
This finding highlights the importance of understanding religious identity as both a personal and social construct, shaped by individual beliefs and broader societal dynamics. It also points to the need for policies and practices that respect religious diversity and protect individuals' rights to express their religious identities without fear of discrimination.

The research reveals that young British Muslims, particularly women, actively engage in the process of cultural hybridity, blending elements of their Sylheti, British, and Islamic identities in ways that are context-dependent and adaptable. This cultural hybridity is not just a passive blending of influences but an active process of negotiation, in which these individuals assert their agency to define their identities on their own terms. This agency is evident in their choices around dress, language, career, and social engagement, where they navigate and challenge traditional expectations and societal norms (Werbner, 2002). This finding contributes to the broader literature on diasporic and hybrid identities, emphasizing that identity is not a fixed category but a dynamic and evolving process. It also suggests that policies and practices aimed at supporting young Muslims should recognize and empower their agency in shaping their identities.

This research contributes to several theoretical frameworks, including intersectionality, diaspora studies, and theories of cultural hybridity and transnationalism. By focusing on the intersecting identities of gender, religion, and ethnicity, this research adds depth to the concept of intersectionality, particularly within the context of British Muslim communities. The experiences of young Muslim women, who navigate multiple forms of discrimination and privilege, illustrate the importance of intersectional analyses in understanding identity formation. This approach challenges the tendency to view Muslim identity as a monolithic or homogeneous category and highlights the diverse and complex experiences within this community (Crenshaw, 1991; Mirza, 2013).

The study also contributes to diaspora studies and theories of transnationalism by examining how young British Muslims maintain connections to their Sylheti heritage while also engaging with the broader British society and the global Muslim ummah. The concept of desh-bidesh is reinterpreted by this generation, who view their identities as more fluid and less tied to a single homeland. This finding aligns with theories of transnationalism, which emphasise the multiple, overlapping connections that diasporic individuals maintain across national boundaries (Mandaville, 2001).

The research supports and extends theories of cultural hybridity by showing how young British Muslims actively blend and negotiate multiple cultural influences in their daily lives. This

hybridity is not just a byproduct of living in a multicultural society but a conscious and strategic process of identity formation. The study highlights the agency of young Muslims in creating new forms of cultural expression that reflect their unique experiences and perspectives (Hall, 1990; Werbner, 2002).

While this research provides valuable insights into the identity formation of third-generation British Muslims, certain limitations must be acknowledged. According to current research practices, one key limitation is the lack of primary fieldwork, such as interviews or ethnographic observation. The study primarily relies on secondary data analysis and theoretical exploration, which, while informative, may not capture the full depth and complexity of individual experiences. Fieldwork, as noted in existing studies, could offer richer, more nuanced insights into how young British Muslims navigate their identities on a day-to-day basis. Additionally, the focus of this study is predominantly on the experiences of young Muslim women from the Sylheti Bengali community. While this concentration allows for a detailed examination of a specific group, it may limit the generalizability of the findings to other Muslim communities in the UK, such as those of Pakistani, Somali, or Arab heritage. Scholars like Alexander (2000) have emphasised the importance of expanding the scope to include a wider array of experiences within the British Muslim community. Future research could address this by exploring more diverse backgrounds to better understand the variations in identity formation.

Moreover, given the complexity and diversity of identity formation processes, there is a potential risk of overgeneralization. This study aims to highlight common themes and shared experiences, but it is essential to recognize that identity formation is a deeply personal process. As Mirza (2013) points out, individual differences related to socioeconomic background, education, and personal beliefs can significantly influence how identity is constructed and expressed. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that the conclusions drawn in this study may not fully account for the variability within the population studied.

Future research could incorporate primary fieldwork, such as interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of young British Muslims. Ethnographic studies could explore how these individuals navigate their identities in various contexts, such as schools, workplaces, and community spaces. Comparative studies that examine the identity formation processes of Muslim communities from different ethnic backgrounds would provide a broader understanding of how cultural, religious, and socio-political factors intersect in different contexts. Such studies could also compare the experiences of British Muslims with those of Muslim communities in other Western countries, such as the United States, France, or Germany. Longitudinal studies that track the identity formation of young British Muslims over time would provide valuable insights into how these processes evolve. Such studies could examine how identity formation is influenced by life events, such as marriage, parenthood, or migration, and how individuals' sense of identity and belonging changes as they age. Future research could also explore the role of digital and social media in shaping the identities of young British Muslims. Given the growing importance of online spaces for social interaction and self-expression, studies could examine how young Muslims use digital platforms to negotiate their identities, build communities, and engage in activism (Mandaville, 2001).

This research has provided a comprehensive analysis of the identity formation processes of third-generation British Muslims, with a focus on young women of Sylheti Bengali heritage. The findings underscore the complexity and fluidity of identity in a multicultural society, highlighting the ways in which these individuals navigate the intersections of religion, culture, gender, and socio-political context. The study contributes to theoretical frameworks on intersectionality,

diaspora, transnationalism, and cultural hybridity, offering new insights into how young British Muslims blend and negotiate multiple influences in their daily lives. However, the research also acknowledges its limitations and suggests directions for future study, including the need for primary fieldwork, comparative and longitudinal studies, and an exploration of the role of digital and social media. Ultimately, this research emphasises the importance of recognizing and supporting the agency of young British Muslims in shaping their identities. By understanding the diverse experiences and perspectives within this community, we can better address the challenges they face and promote a more inclusive and equitable society.

8.2 Synthesis of Findings

This section synthesizes the key findings of the research, establishing connections between emerging themes and addressing the central research questions. The synthesis reflects the complexity of identity formation processes among young British Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage, situating these within broader socio-cultural and political contexts while integrating theoretical insights into intersectionality, cultural hybridity, and transnationalism.

A central finding of this research is the intricate intersectionality of religion, culture, and gender in shaping identity formation for third-generation British Muslim women. These women navigate overlapping and often conflicting expectations from their Islamic faith, Sylheti heritage, and the socio-cultural norms of British society. This intersectionality underscores the ways in which identity is shaped by the interplay of multiple axes of identity, as articulated by Crenshaw (1991). Religion, particularly Islam, emerges as a pivotal component of identity. For many, it provides moral guidance, community, and resilience, especially in the face of societal challenges such as Islamophobia. The hijab exemplifies this intersectionality, serving as both a religious observance and a site of resistance against societal pressures and stereotypes. Women who wear the hijab often do so to assert their autonomy and faith, challenging reductive narratives about Muslim women (Tarlo, 2010; Ameli & Merali, 2007).

Cultural identity is deeply rooted in Sylheti heritage, which informs values, traditions, and social practices. However, as Werbner (2002) observes, tensions arise when these cultural expectations conflict with aspirations for independence and integration into British society. For instance, traditional gender roles and expectations around marriage often clash with women's desires for higher education and professional success. This reflects broader dynamics of cultural hybridity, wherein individuals actively negotiate and redefine their cultural influences. Gender further amplifies these tensions. Young women are expected to embody traditional ideals of modesty and familial responsibility while pursuing personal and professional aspirations. This dual pressure results in a complex process of negotiation, balancing faith, cultural heritage, and the pursuit of autonomy. These findings align with Dwyer (2000), who emphasizes the unique challenges faced by Muslim women at the intersection of cultural, religious, and gendered expectations.

The socio-political climate of post-9/11 and post-7/7 Britain has profoundly influenced the identity formation of young British Muslim women. Islamophobia, multicultural policies, and the politicization of religious identity have added layers of complexity to their experiences.
The rise of Islamophobia has intensified the visibility and vulnerability of visibly Muslim women, particularly those wearing the hijab. Negative stereotypes and public scrutiny have led to discrimination and marginalization in public and professional spaces. Despite these challenges, many women reaffirm their religious identity as a source of strength and resistance, aligning with Awan's (2012) findings on resilience in the face of Islamophobia.

While the UK's multicultural framework theoretically supports diverse expressions of identity, its emphasis on integration is often interpreted as a call for assimilation. This dual expectation creates tensions, as young women strive to maintain their religious and cultural distinctiveness while navigating mainstream British society. Modood (2007) highlights the challenges of negotiating these dual pressures, which can lead to feelings of alienation and being "othered" both within their cultural communities and broader society. The politicization of religious symbols, particularly the hijab, further complicates identity formation. The hijab has become a focal point of societal debates on Islam and multiculturalism, symbolizing both individual faith and collective anxieties about Muslim integration. Women navigate these challenges by asserting their right to religious expression, framing their identity as part of their British citizenship (Tarlo, 2010).

The research highlights how young British Muslim women actively engage in cultural hybridity, blending elements of Sylheti, British, and Islamic traditions. This hybridity is not merely a passive coexistence of influences but an active process of negotiation. Women assert their agency by defining their identities on their own terms, evident in their choices around dress, language, career, and social engagement (Werbner, 2002). This process of hybridity allows for creativity and adaptability, enabling young women to navigate multiple cultural influences while asserting their individuality. However, it also presents challenges, as they must reconcile divergent expectations from family, community, and broader society. Hall's (1990) concept of identity as a "production" rather than a fixed category is particularly relevant, emphasizing the fluid and evolving nature of these women's identities.

Globalisation has significantly shaped the identity formation of third-generation British Muslims. Digital media and transnational networks connect young women to the global Muslim ummah, linking their local experiences with broader global narratives on Islam, social justice, and identity. Mandaville (2001) highlights how these connections foster a dual sense of belonging—rooted in the UK yet deeply connected to global Muslim discourses. The transnational dimension challenges traditional desh-bidesh paradigms by emphasizing the multiplicity of connections and influences that shape identity. This global orientation broadens the scope of identity formation, allowing young women to engage with international issues while navigating their British context (Eade & Garbin, 2006).

A key theme in the findings is the active resistance of young women to stereotypes and reductive narratives. By engaging in activism, public discourse, and creative expression, they challenge negative portrayals and assert their agency in defining their identities. This resistance is both a response to external pressures and a proactive effort to reshape societal perceptions of Muslim identity (Saeed, 2007; Alexander, 2000). Through these efforts, young British Muslim women not only reclaim their narratives but also contribute to broader societal dialogues on identity, belonging, and diversity. Their experiences challenge monolithic representations of Muslim identity, highlighting the complexity and diversity within their community.

The use of autoethnography in this research has been instrumental in capturing the nuanced and personal dimensions of identity formation. By situating personal narratives within broader social and cultural contexts, autoethnography provides a rich, reflexive lens for understanding the lived experiences of young British Muslim women (Ellis, 2004; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). This methodological approach highlights the intersectionality of religion, culture, and gender, linking individual experiences to larger societal issues such as Islamophobia and multiculturalism. It also serves as a tool for empowerment, allowing marginalized voices to challenge dominant stereotypes and present authentic narratives.

The synthesis of findings underscores the complexity of identity formation among young British Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage. By navigating the intersections of religion, culture, and gender, engaging in cultural hybridity, and asserting their agency in the face of socio-political challenges, these women demonstrate resilience and adaptability. Their experiences contribute to a deeper understanding of identity in multicultural societies, highlighting the importance of intersectionality, hybridity, and transnational connections in shaping contemporary identities.

These findings not only enhance theoretical discourse on identity formation but also offer practical insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders. By recognizing and supporting the agency of young British Muslims, we can promote a more inclusive and equitable society that values diversity and fosters mutual understanding.

8.3 Comparison with Existing Literature

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1991), has been instrumental in analysing how overlapping social identities—such as race, gender, and religion—shape experiences of privilege and oppression. This study supports Crenshaw's framework by demonstrating the ways in which young British Muslim women navigate their identities at the intersection of religion, culture, and gender. These findings align with Mirza (2013), who highlights the unique challenges faced by British Muslim women due to their intersecting identities, which situate them in contexts shaped by both patriarchy and Islamophobia. In particular, the dual pressures of societal expectations and cultural norms emerge prominently in this study.

The tension between adhering to traditional Sylheti cultural values and striving for independence in a Western society is consistent with existing research (Dwyer, 2000). This study extends the literature by focusing on the Sylheti Bengali heritage, which introduces additional layers of complexity to identity negotiations. For instance, the research explores how specific cultural practices, such as traditional expectations around marriage and modesty, influence young women’s identity formation in ways that intersect with broader religious and societal dynamics.

The hijab exemplifies the intersectionality of religion and gender, serving both as a personal expression of faith and a symbol of resistance against societal pressures. These findings corroborate the work of Tarlo (2010) and Ameli and Merali (2007), who argue that the hijab functions as both a personal and political statement. However, this study contributes new insights by contextualizing the hijab within the Sylheti Bengali experience, revealing how cultural heritage intersects with religious identity to shape women’s choices.

The concept of cultural hybridity, as articulated by Bhabha (1994) and Hall (1990), posits that identities in postcolonial and diasporic contexts are fluid and shaped by the blending of multiple cultural influences. This research aligns with and extends this theoretical framework by illustrating how young British Muslim women actively blend elements of Sylheti, British, and Islamic identities. This hybridity is evident in their language use, educational pursuits, and engagement with both Sylheti traditions and British societal norms.

Building on Werbner (2002), the study highlights how cultural hybridity is not merely a passive blending of influences but an active process of negotiation and agency. Young women strategically integrate aspects of British culture that align with their values while maintaining religious and cultural practices. This finding challenges reductive narratives of assimilation and instead underscores the agency of young Muslims in shaping their identities.

The research also engages with Gardner's (1995) exploration of the transnational lives of Sylheti Bengalis. While Gardner focuses on first- and second-generation migrants, this study extends her work by examining how third-generation British Muslims reinterpret the desh-bidesh paradigm. For this generation, identity is less about navigating two distinct worlds and more about fluidly blending influences to create a cohesive sense of self.
The socio-political context of post-9/11 and post-7/7 Britain has heightened the visibility of British Muslims and intensified public debates around religious identity. The findings align with Saeed (2007) and Awan (2012), who document the rise of Islamophobia and its impact on Muslim communities. Young Muslim women, particularly those who wear the hijab, face heightened scrutiny and discrimination, reflecting broader societal anxieties about Islam. This study adds depth to existing research by exploring how young British Muslim women respond to these challenges.

Many use their religious identity as a source of strength and resistance, reclaiming the hijab as a symbol of empowerment. This perspective aligns with Zempi and Chakraborti's (2014) analysis of Muslim women's resilience in the face of Islamophobia, while also emphasizing the role of cultural heritage in shaping these acts of resistance. Building on Mandaville (2001) and Eade and Garbin (2006), this study examines the role of transnationalism in shaping the identities of third-generation British Muslims. The findings reveal how global connections, facilitated by digital media and transnational networks, influence young women's sense of belonging. These connections extend beyond the UK to encompass the global Muslim ummah, creating a dual sense of identity rooted in both local and global contexts. This research aligns with Gardner's (1995) work on transnational practices among Sylheti Bengalis while extending it to the experiences of third-generation migrants.

The study demonstrates how young women navigate and reinterpret their ties to Sylhet and the broader Muslim world, integrating these connections into their British identities. This dynamic highlights the evolving nature of the desh-bidesh paradigm, where identity is no longer confined to a binary understanding but reflects a multiplicity of influences.

The findings challenge narratives that portray Muslim women as passive victims of cultural or religious constraints. Instead, they highlight the agency of young British Muslim women in actively negotiating and redefining their identities. This perspective aligns with feminist scholarship, such as Dwyer (2000), which emphasizes the empowerment and autonomy of Muslim women in navigating their roles and expectations. The study also contributes to the growing literature on the resistance of Muslim women against stereotypes and discrimination. By engaging in activism, creative expression, and public discourse, young women challenge dominant narratives and assert their right to self-representation. This aligns with Alexander's (2000) analysis of the second-generation's activism while extending it to the experiences of third-generation British Muslims.

The use of autoethnography in this research provides a unique methodological contribution to the study of identity formation among British Muslims. By centering the researcher's own narrative, the study offers a deeply personal and reflexive analysis that connects individual experiences to broader societal dynamics. This approach aligns with Ellis (2004) and Boylorn and Orbe (2014), who advocate for the use of autoethnography in exploring marginalized experiences. While autoethnography raises concerns about subjectivity and generalizability, this study addresses these limitations by critically engaging with existing literature and situating personal narratives within broader theoretical frameworks. This methodological approach not

only deepens our understanding of identity formation but also challenges dominant representations of British Muslim women.

This research aligns with, extends, and challenges existing literature on identity formation, intersectionality, and cultural hybridity among British Muslims. It reinforces key theoretical concepts while offering new insights into the specific experiences of young British Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage. By highlighting the intersectionality of religion, culture, and gender, the agency of Muslim women, and the evolving nature of the desh-bidesh paradigm, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of identity in multicultural societies. Furthermore, the use of autoethnography provides a valuable methodological lens for exploring the complexities of identity formation, demonstrating its potential for both academic inquiry and social activism.

8.4. Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings significantly expand the theoretical framework of intersectionality, originally conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), by incorporating the unique intersections of religion, culture, and gender in the lives of young British Muslim women. While intersectionality has often focused on race, gender, and class, this research demonstrates its applicability in exploring how cultural and religious contexts intersect to shape identity and experiences of oppression and agency.

This study supports the arguments of Mirza (2013), who emphasizes that intersectionality is critical for understanding the layered experiences of British Muslim women navigating societal expectations, Islamophobia, and cultural traditions. It reveals that these women are not passive subjects but active agents negotiating their multiple identities. These findings align with and extend Crenshaw's and Mirza's work, offering a framework for understanding how specific cultural backgrounds, such as Sylheti Bengali heritage, add depth to intersectional analyses.

The research also contributes to theories of cultural hybridity, particularly those advanced by Bhabha (1994) and Hall (1990). Unlike earlier conceptions that viewed hybridity as a passive blending of cultural elements, this study illustrates the dynamic and creative processes by which young British Muslim women actively reinterpret and redefine their dual cultural heritage. For example, they selectively integrate aspects of British culture, such as professional aspirations, while maintaining Sylheti traditions and Islamic values. This aligns with Werbner's (2002) assertion that hybridity involves agency and performativity in constructing fluid and contextually grounded identities. By exploring how third-generation British Muslims navigate public and private spheres, the study demonstrates the performative nature of identity as theorized by Hall (1990). These young women adapt their expressions of identity depending on social contexts, such as emphasizing Britishness in professional environments and prioritizing cultural or religious elements in familial or communal settings.

The study validates the utility of autoethnography as a methodological tool for exploring identity formation, particularly in marginalized communities. By centering the researcher's narrative, this method provides a nuanced, reflexive, and deeply personal account of the complexities of identity negotiation. This approach aligns with Ellis (2004) and Boylorn and Orbe (2014), who argue that autoethnography bridges personal experience with broader cultural phenomena, offering insights that might be inaccessible through traditional methods. Autoethnography's ability to connect personal narratives to socio-political dynamics is especially relevant in this study. For example, the researcher's experiences with Islamophobia and cultural expectations illustrate how individual identity formation is shaped by broader societal forces. However, the

research also acknowledges the limitations of autoethnography, particularly regarding subjectivity and generalizability, as noted by Anderson (2006).

The findings highlight the unique challenges faced by young British Muslim women in education and employment, including discrimination, cultural expectations, and the politicization of religious symbols like the hijab. Educational institutions and workplaces should develop inclusive policies to support these women, for example by providing spaces for prayer and accommodating religious dress codes, offering mentorship programs tailored to the needs of young Muslim women, training staff to address unconscious bias and create inclusive environments. These measures align with Modood's (2007) recommendations for fostering inclusivity in multicultural settings.

The pervasive impact of Islamophobia on the identity formation of young British Muslim women underscores the need for proactive measures to combat discrimination. Legislative efforts should ensure robust protections against religious and cultural discrimination, while educational campaigns should aim to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam. Initiatives such as interfaith dialogues and cultural awareness programs can foster understanding and reduce prejudice, as suggested by Zempi and Chakraborti (2014).
Empowering young British Muslim women is critical for fostering their confidence and agency in navigating multiple identities. Community organizations and local authorities can do many things, for example, develop leadership programs that focus on building self-confidence and advocacy skills, establish peer mentoring networks to provide support and guidance, create platforms for young women to share their stories and advocate for social change.
Such programs align with Saeed's (2007) emphasis on the importance of self-representation in challenging stereotypes and asserting autonomy.

The research highlights generational tensions within the Sylheti Bengali and broader British Muslim communities, particularly regarding attitudes toward cultural practices, gender roles, and religious expression. Community leaders and organizations can facilitate intergenerational discussions to bridge these gaps, allowing older and younger members to share perspectives and build mutual understanding. These dialogues can help ensure that cultural traditions are passed down in ways that resonate with younger generations, while also enabling older generations to appreciate the unique challenges faced by their descendants. Existing multicultural policies in the UK should be revisited to better address the specific needs of diverse communities. Policymakers should prioritise, for example:
Supporting community-led cultural events and initiatives that promote cross-cultural understanding.
Ensuring public services are accessible and responsive to the needs of Muslim communities.
Encouraging nuanced approaches to integration that respect both individual autonomy and collective cultural expression.
This aligns with Modood's (2007) critique of assimilationist approaches and highlights the need for policies that celebrate diversity while fostering social cohesion.

The implications of this research are both theoretical and practical. The study enhances our understanding of intersectionality and cultural hybridity by illustrating the dynamic, context-dependent nature of identity formation among young British Muslim women. It also demonstrates the value of autoethnography as a methodological tool, offering rich, reflexive insights into personal and collective experiences.

Practically, the research underscores the importance of creating inclusive environments in education, employment, and public life, as well as addressing the systemic and everyday

impacts of Islamophobia. By fostering dialogue, promoting understanding, and empowering young women to navigate their identities with confidence, policymakers, educators, and community leaders can better support the integration and well-being of British Muslim communities. This study contributes to building a more inclusive and equitable society, where individuals are free to express their identities without fear of discrimination or exclusion.

8.5. Critical Reflection on Identity and Belonging

One of the key insights from this research is the fluid and dynamic nature of identity. For third-generation British Muslims, identity is not a fixed or singular construct but a process of continuous negotiation. This aligns with Stuart Hall's (1990) concept of identity as a "production," always in process and shaped by historical, cultural, and social contexts. The findings demonstrate that young British Muslim women skilfully navigate their British, Muslim, and Sylheti identities, blending and balancing these influences in ways that reflect their lived realities. The hijab, for example, emerged as a powerful symbol of this fluidity. For some women, it serves as a marker of religious devotion, cultural pride, and personal agency. For others, it becomes a contested site of identity, shaped by external pressures such as Islamophobia and internal community expectations. These varied experiences underscore the importance of understanding identity as a contextual and individual process, shaped by both internal choices and external constraints.

The research highlights the complex and often contradictory experiences of belonging for third-generation British Muslim women. While they are legally and socially recognized as British, their sense of belonging is frequently challenged by societal narratives that question their loyalty or integration. This reflects broader debates about multiculturalism in the UK, where diversity is celebrated in theory but often problematized in practice (Modood, 2007).

For these women, belonging is not solely tied to national identity but extends to multiple spheres, including their local communities, the global Muslim ummah, and their Sylheti heritage. This multilayered belonging allows them to construct identities that are flexible and resilient, yet it also exposes them to tensions when these spheres come into conflict. For instance, societal Islamophobia and cultural expectations within their communities can create competing pressures that complicate their sense of belonging. A critical reflection on identity and belonging must acknowledge the agency of individuals in shaping their own narratives. This research emphasizes that young British Muslim women are not passive recipients of cultural or societal expectations.

Instead, they actively negotiate and redefine their identities, often challenging stereotypes and resisting imposed labels. This agency is evident in their engagement with education, careers, and activism, where they assert their presence in spaces that may have historically excluded them. By embracing cultural hybridity and intersectionality, these women are forging new paths that challenge traditional notions of identity and belonging. Their ability to navigate multiple cultural influences while maintaining a strong sense of self demonstrates the resilience and creativity inherent in their identity formation processes.

While the findings highlight the strengths and agency of third-generation British Muslim women, they also reveal significant challenges. The pervasive impact of Islamophobia, the politicization of Muslim identities, and generational tensions within their communities create barriers to full belonging and self-expression. These challenges are not insurmountable, but they require systemic change, including greater societal understanding, inclusive policies, and community dialogues that bridge generational divides. At the same time, the research reveals opportunities

for young British Muslim women to redefine what it means to belong in a multicultural society. By leveraging their unique perspectives and experiences, they can contribute to more inclusive narratives of Britishness that celebrate diversity and challenge exclusionary practices.
The findings suggest a need to reconceptualise belonging in a way that acknowledges its fluid and multilayered nature. Belonging should not be seen as a binary state—either included or excluded—but as a spectrum of connections that individuals navigate based on their identities, values, and experiences. This reconceptualization aligns with the idea of "rooted cosmopolitanism," where individuals maintain strong local and cultural ties while engaging with broader global networks (Werbner, 2008).

For third-generation British Muslim women, belonging is an active process that involves both self-definition and collective negotiation. It is about finding spaces where they can express their multifaceted identities without fear of judgment or exclusion. This understanding of belonging has implications for both theory and practice, emphasising the importance of creating environments—whether in schools, workplaces, or communities—that embrace and support diverse identities.

This critical reflection underscores the complexity of identity and belonging for third-generation British Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage. Their experiences challenge simplistic narratives and highlight the interplay of agency, intersectionality, and cultural hybridity in shaping their lives. By critically engaging with these themes, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how identity and belonging are constructed and contested in contemporary multicultural societies. It also calls for continued efforts to support and empower individuals as they navigate the dynamic and multifaceted dimensions of their identities.

8.6. Epilogue

This chapter has synthesised the research findings, compared them with existing literature, and critically reflected on their implications for theory, practice, and our broader understanding of identity and belonging among third-generation British Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage.

The findings highlight that identity formation for these women is a multifaceted and fluid process, characterized by the ongoing negotiation of intersecting identities, including religious, cultural, ethnic, gender, and national affiliations. Religion plays a central role in these women's lives, serving as a source of moral guidance, community, and resilience while also functioning as a site of resistance and empowerment against external challenges such as Islamophobia. This aligns with recent studies emphasizing the dual role of faith as both a personal and socio-political construct (Ameli & Merali, 2007; Tarlo, 2010). By comparing the findings with existing literature, this study extends the work of scholars such as Caroline Adams and Katie Gardner by offering fresh insights into how the concept of desh-bidesh is being reinterpreted by the third generation.

For these women, the traditional dichotomy between homeland (desh) and abroad (bidesh) is less rigid, as they actively construct hybrid identities that incorporate elements of their Sylheti heritage alongside their British upbringing. This blending not only challenges traditional cultural norms but also counters societal stereotypes, reflecting agency and innovation in identity formation. The study reinforces the perspectives of scholars like Werbner (2002) and Bhabha (1994), who argue for a dynamic and performative understanding of cultural hybridity.

The theoretical contributions of this research suggest that intersectionality must go beyond its conventional focus on race, gender, and class to include specific cultural and religious

contexts. The study demonstrates that intersectionality is not only a lens for understanding oppression but also a framework for exploring agency and identity negotiation. Furthermore, the concept of cultural hybridity should be reconceptualized as an active, creative practice rather than a passive blending of influences. This approach emphasizes the agency of individuals in shaping their identities within complex multicultural and transnational contexts.

The use of autoethnography in this research validated its potential as a powerful methodological tool for exploring identity processes, particularly among marginalized or underrepresented communities. By centering the researcher's narrative, the study offered deeply personal and reflexive insights that enhanced our understanding of the lived experiences of third-generation British Muslim women. This methodological approach complements traditional research methods, providing a nuanced perspective that bridges individual experiences with broader socio-political dynamics (Ellis, 2004; Boylorn & Orbe, 2014).

Practically, the research underscores the need for inclusive policies and initiatives that support the educational and professional success of young British Muslim women. This includes addressing systemic barriers such as discrimination and the politicization of religious symbols like the hijab. Creating spaces that respect religious and cultural diversity in schools, workplaces, and public life is essential for fostering inclusion and belonging. Mentorship programs, interfaith dialogues, and leadership development initiatives can empower these women to navigate their identities confidently and contribute positively to society.

The findings also emphasise the importance of combating Islamophobia through legislative protections, public education campaigns, and community-driven efforts to challenge stereotypes and promote understanding. Dialogue across generations within the Sylheti Bengali and broader Muslim communities is critical to bridging gaps in cultural and religious expectations, ensuring that traditions are passed down in ways that remain relevant to younger generations. The critical reflection on identity and belonging revealed the agency, resilience, and adaptability of these women as they assert their place in both their Muslim community and the broader British society. Their experiences highlight the dynamic interplay between individual choices and structural forces, illustrating how identity is shaped through continuous negotiation within a multicultural and often challenging socio-political landscape.

This chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexity of identity and belonging in multicultural contexts, advocating for greater recognition of the diverse experiences within British Muslim communities. It calls for ongoing academic, policy, and community efforts to support and celebrate the multifaceted identities of young British Muslim women, ensuring that they are not only included but empowered to thrive in contemporary society.

PART FOUR

Summations

Conclusion

9.1. Prologue

This concluding chapter synthesises the key findings of the research, reflects on the overall contributions to the understanding of identity formation among third-generation British Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage, and discusses the broader implications of the study. It also addresses the limitations of the research and suggests directions for future inquiry. The aim is to provide a comprehensive summary of the study's significance, its contributions to both theoretical and practical domains, and its potential impact on ongoing discussions about identity, belonging, and multiculturalism in contemporary Britain.

The study has revealed several important insights into the identity (re)formulation processes among third-generation British Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage, particularly young women. Key findings include: The Blurring of Desh-Bidesh: The concept of desh and bidesh, once clearly defined for the first generation of Sylheti Bengali migrants, has become increasingly symbolic and fluid for the third generation. For many young women, desh now represents cultural and familial heritage rather than a tangible homeland, while bidesh, once seen as foreign, has become their established home.

However, this desh-bidesh paradigm continues to influence identity in ways that are less tied to geography and more rooted in cultural memory and heritage. As desh becomes an ancestral homeland—more imagined than real—the desh-bidesh framework evolves from an anchor into a myth. At the same time, bidesh, though home, often remains a place of hostility. In this context, it can be argued that British-born Muslim women frequently find themselves in a 'liminal space,' navigating between cultures. Faith, in this scenario, offers solace, while the global Muslim Ummah provides a sense of belonging. Within this sense of belonging, they form an identity that grants them both a sense of self and a framework to navigate the complexities of their cultural and social environment.

Islam has emerged as a significant marker of identity for the third generation, not only as a personal faith but as a communal identity and a source of strength and resilience in the face of rising Islamophobia. The hijab, in particular, has been politicised but is also embraced by many young Muslim women as a symbol of autonomy and resistance against societal pressures.

While the first generation of Sylheti Bengalis fought against racism primarily based on their ethnicity, the third generation faces the challenge of Islamophobia. This shift reflects how public perceptions have evolved, focusing more on religious identity as a marker of difference than on racial or ethnic distinctions. Young Muslim women are navigating the often-conflicting expectations of their cultural heritage and British society. This negotiation is particularly evident in the areas of education, professional aspirations, and marriage. While these women are challenging traditional gender roles, they also experience pressure to maintain family honour and uphold cultural traditions. Third-generation British Muslim women are increasingly active in public life, using activism, education, and political participation to challenge stereotypes, combat discrimination, and promote social justice. Their engagement reflects a broader trend of young Muslims reclaiming their narratives and asserting their place within British society.

9.2. Key Findings and Contributions

The research has provided an in-depth exploration of the identity formation processes among young British Muslim women, highlighting the complex interplay of religious, cultural, gender,

and national identities. Several key findings emerged from the study: The research revealed that these women navigate multiple, intersecting identities, with religion, culture, and gender playing pivotal roles. The concept of intersectionality was expanded to include the specific cultural and religious contexts of British Muslim women, demonstrating how these intersecting identities shape their experiences and challenges. The study illustrated that identity formation among these women involves more than just blending cultural elements from their Sylheti heritage and British environment. It involves an active process of reinterpretation and innovation, where these women create hybrid identities that reflect their dual heritage and challenge traditional notions of cultural belonging.

The research highlighted the significant agency and resilience that young British Muslim women demonstrate in negotiating their identities. Despite facing external pressures such as Islamophobia and cultural expectations, these women actively engage in shaping their narratives and asserting their place in both the Muslim community and broader British society. The study underscored the profound impact of the socio-political context on the identity formation of these women. Islamophobia, the politicization of religious identity, and the pressures of multicultural integration were shown to be significant factors influencing how these women construct and express their identities. The use of autoethnography provided a deeply personal and reflexive insight into the lived experiences of young British Muslim women, demonstrating the method's value in capturing the complexities of identity formation in marginalized communities.

These findings contribute to the academic discourse on identity, intersectionality, and cultural hybridity, while also offering practical insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders. The research emphasizes the need for inclusive policies that support the integration and well-being of British Muslim communities and for initiatives that empower young Muslim women to navigate their identities with confidence. This study makes several key contributions to the existing body of knowledge. By focusing on the third generation of British-born Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage, it extends the analysis of the desh-bidesh paradigm beyond the experiences of the first and second generations. This research uniquely traces the evolution of the paradigm across three generations, demonstrating how it continues to shape identity formation in increasingly symbolic and complex ways. In doing so, it offers a deeper understanding of how cultural memory and heritage influence the identities of contemporary British-born Muslims within a changing social landscape.

The study also highlights the gendered dimensions of identity formation, exploring how young Muslim women, in particular, navigate the intersection of religion, culture, and societal expectations. This adds depth to our understanding of how gender shapes the experience of migration and identity (re)formulation. By examining the shift from racism to Islamophobia, the research adds to the discourse on how identity markers evolve in response to changing socio-political climates. It shows how British Muslims are increasingly defined by their faith, with implications for how they are perceived and treated in society. The study foregrounds the agency of young Muslim women in asserting their identities. Through education, professional success, and activism, these women are actively resisting the stereotypes and limitations imposed on them by both their communities and the broader society.

9.3. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study has several important theoretical and practical implications:
The research suggests that intersectionality as a theoretical framework should be expanded to consider specific cultural and religious contexts, particularly when analysing the identities of marginalised groups such as British Muslim women. The study calls for a reconceptualisation of

cultural hybridity as a dynamic and creative process, where individuals actively engage in shaping their identities rather than passively blending cultural influences.
The research validates the use of autoethnography as a powerful tool for exploring identity formation, offering rich, reflexive insights that complement traditional research methods.

The findings highlight the need for policies that support the educational and professional success of young British Muslim women, address Islamophobia, and promote inclusivity within multicultural societies. The research underscores the importance of fostering dialogue across generations within the Sylheti Bengali and broader British Muslim communities, to bridge generational gaps and support the identity formation of younger generations.
Schools and universities should implement programs that respect and accommodate religious and cultural diversity, providing safe and supportive environments for young Muslim women to thrive academically and socially.

9.4. Limitations of the Research

While the research provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations:
The study focused primarily on the experiences of young British Muslim women from the Sylheti Bengali community, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other Muslim communities in the UK or beyond. Future research could broaden the scope to include a more diverse range of experiences within the British Muslim community. While autoethnography offers rich, personal insights, it is inherently subjective and may not fully capture the diversity of experiences within the population studied. The findings are closely tied to the researcher's individual experiences, which may not be representative of all young British Muslim women. Future studies could complement autoethnography with other qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to provide a more comprehensive understanding.
The research was conducted within a specific socio-political context, marked by rising Islamophobia and debates about multiculturalism in the UK. As these contexts evolve, the experiences of young British Muslim women may also change, necessitating ongoing research to capture these dynamics.

8.5. Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the findings and limitations of this study, several directions for future research are suggested: Future research could explore identity formation among British Muslim women from different ethnic backgrounds, such as Pakistani, Somali, or Arab heritage, to understand the similarities and differences in their experiences and challenges. Longitudinal research could track the identity formation processes of young British Muslim women over time, examining how their identities evolve in response to changing personal circumstances and socio-political environments. Given the growing importance of digital and social media in shaping identity, future studies could investigate how young British Muslim women use online platforms to negotiate their identities, build communities, and engage in activism. The expanded framework of intersectionality developed in this study could be applied to other marginalized groups, both within the UK and globally, to explore how different cultural and religious contexts influence identity formation.

9.6 Final Reflections

This research has provided a comprehensive exploration of the identity formation processes among third-generation British Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage, offering new insights into the complexities of navigating multiple, intersecting identities in a multicultural society. The study highlights the agency, resilience, and creativity of these women as they assert their place in both the Muslim community and broader British society, challenging stereotypes and reclaiming their narratives. The findings underscore the importance of supporting these women

in their identity negotiations, through inclusive policies, educational opportunities, and community engagement. As the UK continues to grapple with questions of identity, belonging, and integration, this research offers valuable perspectives that can inform both academic discourse and practical interventions. Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of identity and belonging in contemporary Britain, emphasising the need for ongoing support and recognition of the diverse experiences within British Muslim communities. The journey of these young women is a testament to the strength and resilience of those who navigate the complex terrain of identity in a rapidly changing world, and their stories offer important lessons for us all.

The process of identity (re)formulation for young Muslim women in London's East End, particularly those of Sylheti Bengali heritage, is a complex interplay between agency and constraint. While these women exhibit a significant degree of agency in negotiating and (re)formulating their identities, their choices are not entirely "free" in the sense of being unconstrained by external forces. Instead, their identity formation is shaped by a range of socio-cultural, religious, and political factors that both enable and limit their choices.

Young Muslim women in London's East End often face strong cultural expectations from their families and communities. These expectations include adherence to traditional gender roles, cultural practices, and religious observances (Gardner, 1995). The concept of desh-bidesh (home and abroad) remains a significant cultural framework, influencing how these women navigate their identities between their Sylheti heritage and British upbringing (Adams, 1987). Family obligations, particularly the pressure to maintain family honour and comply with community norms, can limit the extent to which these women feel free to make autonomous choices about their identities. Choices related to education, marriage, and career are often negotiated within the context of these cultural expectations (Dwyer, 2000).

The broader socio-political context in the UK, marked by rising Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment, significantly impacts the identity (re)formation of young Muslim women. Public perceptions of Muslims, particularly in the aftermath of events like 9/11 and 7/7, have led to increased scrutiny and discrimination, especially for women who visibly express their faith through practices like wearing the hijab (Tarlo, 2010; Saeed, 2007).

These external pressures create a constraining environment where the choices of young Muslim women are influenced by the need to navigate negative stereotypes and potential hostility. The politicization of their religious identity means that their choices are often framed by the desire to resist marginalisation while asserting their place in British society (Zempi & Chakraborti, 2014). Internalised cultural and religious expectations also play a role in shaping how these women view themselves and their choices. The sense of duty towards their cultural heritage and religious community can lead to self-imposed constraints on how freely they feel they can express their identities (Gardner, 1995).

This internalised sense of obligation can limit the perceived freedom in making choices that deviate from established norms. Despite these constraints, young Muslim women in London's East End demonstrate significant agency in reinterpreting and innovating within the frameworks of their cultural and religious identities. They actively engage in creating hybrid identities that blend elements of their Sylheti Bengali heritage with their British identities (Hall, 1990). This process involves selectively integrating aspects of both cultures to create a sense of belonging that is personally meaningful and contextually appropriate (Bhabha, 1994). For instance, while they may adhere to cultural expectations in some areas, such as family values, they may also

challenge traditional gender roles by pursuing higher education and careers, thereby redefining what it means to be a British Muslim woman (Dwyer, 2000).

The research highlights how these women use their religious identity as a symbol of empowerment and resistance against societal pressures (Tarlo, 2010). By reclaiming the narrative around their religious practices, they assert their autonomy and challenge the negative stereotypes that often define them in broader society. This resistance is a powerful form of agency, demonstrating their ability to shape their identities on their own terms, even in the face of external constraints (Zempi & Chakraborti, 2014). Young Muslim women in London's East End are increasingly engaging in public and political life as a means of asserting their identities and advocating for their rights. This engagement takes many forms, from community activism to participation in broader social and political movements. Through these activities, they not only contribute to the redefinition of British Muslim identity but also challenge the limitations imposed by both their own communities and the broader society (Mirza, 2013).

The choices available to young Muslim women in London's East End for (re)formulating their identities are neither entirely free nor entirely constrained. They are shaped by a complex web of cultural, religious, and socio-political factors that both limit and enable their agency. While these women face significant pressures from both within their communities and from the broader society, they also exhibit remarkable resilience, creativity, and autonomy in navigating these challenges. Their identity (re)formation process is thus a negotiated balance between maintaining cultural and religious integrity and asserting their place within a multicultural British society. The degree of freedom in their choices is contingent upon their ability to mediate these multiple influences and to carve out spaces where they can assert their identities on their own terms.

This study has offered a nuanced understanding of how young British Muslim women of Sylheti Bengali heritage navigate the complexities of identity and belonging in the UK. Their experiences reflect broader themes of migration, religion, and gender, revealing the intricate ways in which personal, communal, and societal factors intersect to shape identity. The research highlights both the constraints and opportunities these women face as they seek to assert their autonomy and agency in a society that often views them through a lens of suspicion and marginalisation. Yet, through education, activism, and public engagement, these women are challenging the stereotypes that surround them, contributing to a reimagining of what it means to be both British and Muslim in contemporary Britain.

9.7 Final Summation

This research set out to explore the central question: "How free are free choices in (re)formulating identity for young Muslim women in London's East End?"

Two key supplementary questions guided this inquiry:

1. Impact of Socio-Political Events: The Salman Rushdie Affair, 9/11, and 7/7 emerged as pivotal moments in shaping the identity and belonging of British-born Muslims, particularly young women of Sylheti Bengali heritage. These events amplified Islamophobia, politicised Muslim identity, and deepened feelings of alienation. Yet, paradoxically, they also inspired resilience and agency. Many young women reclaimed the hijab as both a personal statement of faith and a political symbol of resistance. Through activism and public engagement, they worked to challenge stereotypes and assert their rightful place in British society.

2. Generational Differences in Identity and Belonging: The evolution of the desh-bidesh (home-abroad) paradigm across generations reveals shifting dynamics of identity. For the first generation, desh was a tangible homeland, and bidesh a temporary space of opportunity. The second generation began to blur these distinctions, striving to balance cultural heritage with integration into British life. For the third generation, desh often represents a symbolic connection to heritage, while bidesh is embraced as home, albeit a home sometimes fraught with external challenges and societal scrutiny.

This study has taken the concept of desh-bidesh and introduced it as a paradigm through which generational and gendered notions of identity and belonging can be explored, understood, and studied. By framing desh-bidesh not just as a physical divide but as a symbolic and evolving construct, the research provides a lens to examine the shifting experiences of identity across generations. For first-generation Sylheti migrants, desh-bidesh was rooted in tangible realities of migration, nostalgia, and return. For the second and third generations, it has become a framework to navigate complex identities, blending cultural memory, religious heritage, and contemporary British experiences. This paradigm allows for a nuanced understanding of how identity formation is influenced by both internal factors—such as family expectations and cultural heritage—and external pressures, such as Islamophobia and multicultural policies. By introducing desh-bidesh as a paradigm, this study offers a valuable tool for further research on the intersections of migration, generational identity, and gendered experiences.

The central research question was addressed by analysing how socio-political pressures, Islamophobia, and internal community expectations around gender, family, and religion shape identity (re)formation. The findings demonstrate that the identity choices of young Muslim women are constrained by cultural expectations and external discrimination. However, they also exhibit remarkable resilience and agency. By pursuing education, careers, and activism, they navigate the complex interplay of internal and external pressures, balancing tradition with autonomy and forging new paths for self-expression within British society. Ultimately, the (re)formation of their identities is neither entirely free nor fully constrained.

It is a negotiated and evolving process, shaped by cultural, religious, and socio-political factors, yet marked by creativity and empowerment. These women's journeys illustrate how individuals carve out spaces for self-definition, even within restrictive environments. As the socio-political landscape continues to evolve, so too will the identities and experiences of British Muslims. The contributions of this generation are vital not only to the Sylheti Bengali community but also to broader narratives of multiculturalism, integration, and belonging in the UK. They are active participants in shaping these discourses, influencing how future generations will navigate their identities.

As Caroline Adams (1987) once remarked when asked if she would extend her scholarship beyond the first generation of Sylheti Bengali migration to the UK, she expressed hope that the second generation would tell their own stories, symbolically passing on the baton. With this study, I hope to have done justice to that legacy. This research—an auto ethnographical, gendered, generational exploration of identity and belonging through the desh-bidesh paradigm—extends the analysis beyond the first and second generations, tracing the evolving framework of identity across three generations. It reveals how the desh-bides paradigm has shifted from a geographic reality to a symbolic construct, profoundly shaping the experiences of contemporary British-born Sylheti Muslims.

This study underscores the role of cultural memory, heritage, and socio-political dynamics in shaping identity formation among young British Muslims. It is dedicated to the third generation

and serves as an invitation for future generations of British-born Muslims of Sylheti Bengali heritage to continue this work—to research, write, and tell their own stories about the forces shaping their identities, sense of belonging, and relationships with Britain, Bangladesh, and the global Muslim Ummah. In a world that is becoming increasingly complex and conflicted, a greater understanding of ourselves and our perception of others can offer hope for navigating these challenges.

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