

A politics of one's own: Leisure, belonging, and momentary self-exclusion among British Bangladeshi women in East London

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Abstract

This paper investigates how leisure activities inform identification processes among British Bangladeshi Muslim women in Tower Hamlets, London. Focusing on women-only events organised in community centres that cater to British Bangladeshi women, we explore the significance of these spaces in the negotiation and maintenance of identity and community. Based on a two-year ethnography conducted as part of the research project *Migrant Memory and Postcolonial Imagination*, we argue that women-only leisure activities are part of a strategy of momentary self-exclusion, which is central to the articulation of a politics of location for participating women. The focus on leisure contributes to the literature on diaspora studies by providing a more holistic understanding of questions of belonging.

Keywords: British Bangladeshis, Diaspora, Gender, Leisure, Politics of Location

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1. Introduction

Questions of identity among British Bangladeshi Muslim women in East London have been central to much academic research in the field of diaspora studies (Gardner, 2002; N. Ahmed, 2005; Hoque, 2015). In these studies, the complex positioning of identities at the intersection of different socio-economic, national, gendered, and religious discourses has been an entry point to understanding notions of community and belonging in the diaspora. This article aims to contribute to and broaden this field of research by exploring the role of leisure among British Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets, London. We argue that momentary gendered self-exclusion to pursue leisure activities is formative of a ‘politics of location’ – a materialisation of intersections of diverse articulations of belonging in a context of continuing movements and journeys (Brah, 2005: 201).

This research is part of the five-year research project *Migrant Memory and Postcolonial Imagination (MMPI)*ⁱ and was conducted in collaboration with a British Bangladeshi women-only community organisation based in Tower Hamlets, London. Our findings derive from a suite of methods applied as part of an ethnography, which we conducted in community centres in Tower Hamlets from 2017 to 2020ⁱⁱ. We found that, among the plethora of cultural and community activities catering to the British Bangladeshi community in the borough, our research participants expressed strong preferences for engaging in leisure activities outside the gaze of men. In the first part of the article, we examine the existing literature on the British Bangladeshi female

diaspora, the politics of leisure, as well as their entanglements. Against this backdrop, we provide contextual insights about our research participants and present our methodological approach. In the following two sections, we explore the nature of constraints to leisure practices experienced by our research participants, especially in relation to questions of inter and intra-community relations, religion, labour, and gender. We then discuss a women-only event, the *Boishaki Adda*, to theorise practices of sociability predicated on momentary gendered self-exclusion as a vital component of a politics of location in Tower Hamlets. Our analysis shows that for our research participants, these momentary self-exclusionary practices do not imply a withdrawal from the multiple social communities they belong to, but rather represent moments of relief from the constraints they experience in other aspects of their lives and contribute to joyful articulation of the self. Building on a long tradition of scholarly work articulating the need for a space for women's expression of identity through self-exclusion (Woolf, 1929; hooks, 1989; Garber and McRobbie, 1991; Skeggs, 1999; Lewis et al., 2015), we offer a new perspective for the field of diaspora studies on how British Bangladeshi Muslim women articulate, maintain, and negotiate their very own politics of location in Tower Hamlets today.

2. British Bangladeshi Women, Leisure, and Identity

Research into leisure activities pursued by British South Asians as means of negotiating belonging has long found its way into the academic canon, e.g. in considerations on Day-timersⁱⁱⁱ among Punjabi communities (Kim, 2014: 642), as well as cinema-going activities in Britain (Dudrah, 2002; Puwar, 2007), however, inquiries into British Bangladeshi women's leisure practices represent a rather unscrutinised, albeit significant, area of investigation. Most Bangladeshi women who moved to London in the 1970s and 1980s found little time for leisure in their daily lives, as they were busy running their households and looking after their families. In the early years after migration, life in London was particularly harsh for newly arrived women because they often found themselves in overcrowded and patriarchal households (Asghar, 1994: 71-72; Hussain, 2005: 23; Hoque, 2015: 38), and had limited opportunities to communicate with family members back home, which could make life particularly lonely (N. Ahmed, 2005: 111; Gardner, 2002: 118). Moreover, streets were unsafe then due to the high frequency of racist attacks (Hoque, 2015:

89). And yet, notwithstanding the difficulties they encountered, some women embraced the challenges of building a new life in East London by becoming involved in activities aimed at preserving Bengali cultural, linguistic, and religious practices (N. Ahmed, 2005: 105-106), while others joined organised industrial actions and anti-racist protests (Brah, 2005: 82).

The majority of Bangladeshi women who moved to London in the 1970s and 1980s, however, found little time for leisure (N. Ahmed, 2005). According to a 2003 study by Phillipson, N. Ahmed, and Latimer, British Bangladeshi women only very occasionally found the time to go to the gym or gardening, activities which they predominantly pursued during daytime hours when children were in school (27). While this data is two decades old and arguably the lack of time for leisure is not specific to only British Bangladeshi women, constraints to leisure opportunities persist. Many British Bangladeshis experience economic hardship, and Tower Hamlets Council's latest report on housing (2016b) found that 73% of British Asian households in Tower Hamlets are overcrowded, adding to the challenges of women's experiences in the borough.

Since the 1980s, research in leisure studies found that women often do not feel like they have 'a right to leisure' (Henderson and Bialeschki, 1991: 51), which is connected to the gendered organisation of Western economies (Deem, 1986), discourses around safety (Stanko, 1997) as well as to notions of respectability (Chaney, 1997). Since then, Black feminist scholars, such as Hazel Carby (1982), have put the spotlight on the simultaneous impact of patriarchy, race, and class on leisure. Moreover, feminist geographers have highlighted how these social dimensions severely impact opportunities for leisure, as they materialise in uneven power relations that structure the organisation of and access to private and public space (McDowell, 1993; Zukin, 1995; Massey, 2008). Observing places like Kilburn, London, Doreen Massey (2008: 26) pointed out how different socio-economic conditions determine how some people 'are more in charge' than others in determining their movements, and their use of time and space, and that their power also negatively impact the opportunities of those who do not have the same mobility.

Muslim British Bangladeshi women's experiences of leisure in London are often additionally read through a prism of their religious belonging. Research on Muslim women's experiences of leisure in Europe has found that their possibilities to pursue such activities are more restricted compared to other women. Green and Singleton (2006: 859), for example, find that the possibilities of British South Asian Muslim women to pursue leisure activities are more restricted because, apart from the risk of violence as well as gossip and (religious) judgement from within the communities they belong to, they are also at higher risk of encountering racial harassment. However, as they point out, this does not mean that women give up on leisure, but instead, they carefully manage their risks, and therefore, rather than being considered 'at risk', they should be considered 'risk takers' (856).

Following Massey's reflections above and her observations that those less mobile and more marginalised can desire moments of 'peace and quiet' to articulate a 'strong sense of place' while linking their 'place to places beyond' (2008: 29), we analyse British Bangladeshi women's complex diasporic positioning in private and public spaces, alongside their movements, transgressions, and agency, in articulating complex notions of rootedness. For diasporic subjects, such rootedness can be the product of a politics of location, which is the vital process of negotiating belonging at the intersection of social, cultural, political and physical boundaries as well as ongoing movements and journeys (Brah, 2005: 201). As a social activity, we argue that leisure can become a vehicle of such politics of location through its situatedness between those boundaries and movements. We also propose to interpret leisure as an articulation of joy, which Sara Ahmed (2004: 164-165) argues to be a powerful assertion of agency in her work on queer pleasure. We propose, similarly, that British Bangladeshi women's leisure practices, while at times disciplined, can be a productive motor reshaping given boundaries by claiming social spaces and participating in social encounters productive of shared notions of belonging. Our research, therefore, contributes to studies on belonging among British Bangladeshi women by analysing the constraints to leisure experienced by our research participants, the spaces they occupy and produce, and the practices they engage in. We also analyse the ways in which interactions within these spaces contribute to the shaping of identities.

3. Methodology and Introduction to the Field

Our research is based on an ethnography (2017-2020) conducted around a number of British Bangladeshi cultural hubs in Tower Hamlets, London. Our research findings are based on two and a half years of intensive participant observation and a series of one-to-one interviews and focus groups with women of Bangladeshi heritage living in the borough, many of which we are still in touch with. According to the 2021 census, half of the 629,583 people of Bangladeshi heritage in England and Wales live in Tower Hamlets (34.6% of its population). Even though (mostly temporary) migration from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to East London started during colonial times, the first significant movement of migrants from Bangladesh arrived in Britain in the 1970s (Hoque, 2015: xi), paving the way for the creation of the large British Bangladeshi community currently living in Tower Hamlets. Given this concentration of people of Bangladeshi heritage, there are several religious, cultural and community centres in the area, where a variety of activities and events are organised throughout the year. We started our fieldwork in November 2017 by attending one of the most prominent events in the British Bangladeshi calendar: the annual theatre festival *A Season of Bangla Drama*. This festival introduced us to the British Bangladeshi cultural scene of Tower Hamlets as we met key people who, in turn, invited us to attend a variety of other events – cultural festivals, plays, poetry, and music events – allowing us to get to know the field.

As we became familiar and established relationships with a variety of cultural and community groups operating in the borough, we got involved in particular with an organisation which organises activities for British Bangladeshi women (but it is open to other women from the area too), and which was created in 2010 to support women from the community to enter the paid workforce, while also providing a space to socialise. Its founder, Farah, is a British Bangladeshi Muslim woman who used to work as a Housing Officer for Tower Hamlets' Council and had previously worked as an interpreter for the Council. She is a well-known person in the borough and collaborates with an ever-growing local network of women and partner organisations. Partly funded by the local Council, this organisation usually holds stalls at cultural celebrations, like the

annual *Boishakhi Mela*^{iv}, but predominantly facilitates women-only events, such as coffee mornings, free training in catering and fruit carving, and since 2016, *Saree Days*. Most of these events occur during school hours, the most convenient time for attendees, primarily women with childcare duties and without formal employment. On *Saree Days*, organised in a local community centre, women wear their best dresses and spend the day participating in leisure activities, including food, music, games, dance, and poetry. Between 2018 and 2020, we participated in these activities and established a very good relationship with Farah, who eventually included us in different Facebook and WhatsApp groups so to allow us to keep up with their activities. Our constant participation in the activities organised by the group and the possibility to interact online as well as in person allowed us to get to know many attendees, some of whom agreed to take part in this study. All participants included in this research are bilingual, and our conversations took place in English. We arranged interviews and focus groups in community centres in Tower Hamlets, where we could book rooms for privacy.

Based on a process of purposive sampling (O'Reilly, 2008: 196), we interviewed 13 second-generation British Bangladeshi Muslim women individually and in focus groups. The women included in this study are between 35-50 years old and live in Tower Hamlets. All of them, except one, were married with children, seven were housewives, and the other six were employed in paid labour^v. Religion is an integral part of the identity of our research participants, as in fact, to varying degrees, they adhere to the principle of *Purdah*, an Islamic practice organising gendered seclusion on the basis of morality (Amin, 1997: 213-214), meaning they wear hijabs and would not participate in activities involving dancing or singing with or in front of men. While most of our research participants are working-class, some come from a middle-class background in Bangladesh and have a mixed educational background. All of them had completed their secondary school education, and three had gone to university. The group's economic and cultural capital is, therefore, mixed. The data collected during the research was interpreted through thematic analysis in an iterative process, which was discussed throughout with the research participants. As the data was collected collaboratively and included textual and visual sources, we used the software NVivo to organise and analyse data.

During the three years of fieldwork, we navigated complex insider-outsider-dynamics. Considering our position as white, mobile, female European academics based in London, we are aware of the imbalance of power embedded in knowledge production. As we aspire towards the creation of a 'more egalitarian research process', in line with the overall ethos of the *MMPI* project (Hornabrook et al., 2022: 98), our practice has been punctuated by constant self-reflection and open conversations with the organiser and attendees of the events. Our position as outsiders also had its benefits, as the fact that we were not involved in intra-community dynamics meant that our research participants could express their feelings about certain community dynamics without fear of offending us. Our gender played, of course, a key role in the research: as women, we were allowed into spaces from which men are banished, and our participation in the practices organised at these events allowed us to establish meaningful relationships with research participants, and have informal conversations with them, which also allowed them to get to know us.

It is important to stress that we did not simply turn up at these events with our notebooks to observe what was going on, but we actively participated in all of the activities organised there: as soon as we arrived, we were usually directed towards a changing room, where other attendees would choose a saree for us, help us put it on, and helped to choose our makeup. Afterwards, we would participate in (and sometimes moderate) games, runways, and dancing. Moreover, we usually contributed to setting up the space and cleaning up afterwards. Our active participation in the event was pivotal in helping us understand the dynamics we were witnessing. At the same time, it helped us convey the message that we were not there to judge, but to learn from our research participants. Our conclusions, thus, emerge from a process of dialogue which led to the co-production of meanings within the situated social context of our study. While we do not claim to have erased the imbalance of power of the research, it is important for us to clarify that we do not pretend to speak for our research participants, but rather, in this article, we bear witness to gendered political dynamics embedded in the organisation of leisure that we had the

possibility to access and reflect upon. To protect the participants of this study from unintended consequences, we decided to use pseudonyms in this paper.

4. Public Space, Leisure and Inter/Intra community dynamics

The opportunities for leisure for British Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets are manifold, and many mixed-gender spaces and events represent crucial moments for pleasure and the building of identity and community within the diaspora. In our research, we found that the second-generation British Bangladeshi women included in this study take part or have taken part in mixed-gender leisure events as part of family or cultural celebrations, like the *Boishakhi Mela*. However, during our conversations, research participants expressed a clear preference for women-only events. Farah, the founder of the women-only organisation we worked with, told us that while there are many events for the British Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets, her organisation fills a gap in facilitating events which cater exclusively to women.

Previous research in the field has found that British Bangladeshi women's participation in leisure activities in public spaces was limited by fears of racist and Islamophobic attacks (Phillipson, Ahmed, and Latimer, 2003: 37-38), but our research found racism to be a lesser concern for our participants. Even though many of our research participants indeed shared memories of discrimination in Tower Hamlets, none of them ever expressed a direct connection between their preference for women-only events and fears of potential racist attacks. This is because memories of these incidents tended to be placed mostly in the past. Halima, for example, shared:

I remember I used to take another way because I was scared these girls might be there. Every time I came from the stairs, they would make comments and spit at me and whatnot. I just would go home. [...] They used to call us Pakis.

The memory of this racist incident was followed by a reflection of how things have changed in the borough since:

*Racism is not as bad anymore. Maybe it is because of the community
not so much mixing.*

Halima thus proposed that she experiences less racism today because her community does not mix as much anymore. Moreover, even though racism and Islamophobia persist within British society (Dodd and Grierson, 2019), in Tower Hamlets, many initiatives are now organised which cater to the local British Bangladeshi community, for example, the theatre festival *A Season of Bangla Drama* or the annual *Boishakhi Mela* (the celebration for the Bengali new year). Our participants mentioned attending these events, but they also mentioned how differing views within the community over gender roles in public spaces effectively limit their possibility of enjoying them. They, therefore, highlighted the impact of gender dynamics within the community on their decision to (not) take part in public events.

The debate around the *Boishakhi Mela* is a case in point. Launched in 1998, the *Mela* is the most prominent intergenerational gender-mixed cultural celebration associated with the Bangladeshi diaspora in London, with an average of 40,000 visitors during the day, which peaks in the late afternoon at around 20,000 (Tower Hamlets Council, 2016a). This event has been central to academic considerations on processes of cultural transmission in the Bangladeshi diaspora and the negotiation of spatial politics of belonging (Eade and Garbin, 2006; Hoque, 2015; Alexander, 2019). We observed the event to bring together people of Bengali heritage and of all genders to allow them to engage safely in the performance of Bengali cultural practices, but the *Mela* has also created some divisions between political and religious groups within the community (Alexander, 2019: 240). Over the years, this event has come to represent a contested site for the negotiation between processes of commercialisation, nationalisation, and Islamisation of Bangladeshi culture (Alexander, 2019), and is particularly symptomatic of continuing tensions between secular and religious ideologies, both in the diaspora and in Bangladesh (Eade and Garbin, 2006: 185).

British Bangladeshi diasporic politics are deeply affected by national, religious, and cultural politics in Bangladesh, which since Independence have seen a struggle between secularist and religious perspectives over the meaning of 'Bangladeshiness' and its relationship with the wider Bengali culture. This has translated into competing views on what it means to be an authentic Bengali in East London (Alexander, 2019: 236, 240). If institutions such as the East London Mosque, for example, have been vocal in criticising the *Mela* for its 'Western values' and 'Sikh/Hindu practices', others defend the *Mela* to hold a more secularist perspective and praise it precisely for its 'multicultural character' (Eade and Garbin, 2006: 186). In fact, even though Islam is the dominant religion in Bangladesh, it is not the only one. The *Mela* remains at the centre of competing views on cultural identity, but not all *Mela*-goers share concerns about these issues (Alexander, 2019: 242). While confrontations between secularists and Islamists persist, 'the British Bangladeshi approach to religion differs to various degrees and cannot be reduced to a secularist versus Islamist narrative' (Clini et al., 2021: 5). Many British Bangladeshis live lives synthesising both strands effortlessly in their articulation of identity (Eade and Garbin, 2006: 186). In this sense, the *Mela* is not only an 'outward-facing performance of Bengali identities' but also a site for 'pleasure, relaxation, and fun' (Alexander, 2019: 230, 242). And yet, many participants included in this study told us they prefer the privacy of women-only celebrations to the publicness of the *Mela*. When we mentioned the *Boishakhi Mela*, Halima, who regularly attends women-only events, made a direct link between her marital status and her attendance of the *Mela*:

Actually, I have not been for quite a long time. I sit at home and watch it on the TV. Before, when I was on my own, single, we used to attend. Other than that, I don't attend.

By mentioning her change of habits, Halima reveals how her organisation of leisure has changed after marriage. When attending the *Mela*, we saw both married and non-married women - some of them taking part in activities involving poetry, dancing, singing, and storytelling, which is why we assumed the reasons for not attending went beyond marital status. When asking un-married Ayesha about the *Mela*, she told us:

I used to go to Boishakhi Mela and there are a lot of things to do, but I have not been for a couple of years.

When prompted as of why she does not attend anymore, Ayesha replied that '*we do our thing*', implying the availability of better alternatives, which we will explore in the following sections.

5. The Gendered Organisation of Leisure

In addition to the Mela, Farah and her organisation set up the *Boishakhi Adda*, which provides a space designed exclusively by and for women. *Adda* describes a social practice from Bengal, which can be translated as 'a place for the chats of intimate friends' (Chakrabarty, 2009: 180)^{vi}. Our participants' preference for a women-only Adda, instead of the larger *Mela*, is predicated not exclusively on relationship status but definitely on the gender of its attendees. When discussing her thoughts on the relevance of their events in comparison to events like the *Boishakhi Mela*, Farah commented:

That is another thing, the women did not want to mix because we are always getting opinions [by men]. So, we do it women only. If it is women's only, we can come, we can really do stuff, a little bit of dancing. But if it is mixed, a lot of women won't come.

The organisation extends their activities to larger mixed-gender events, but many of its attendees do not want to engage in events such as the *Mela* because of the presence of men, who will affect their experiences and limit their possibilities of self-expression. The local group consequently responds to a demand for spaces where women, as she says, can 'really do stuff' without 'getting opinions'. Talking about the experiences that women have with men in public spaces, she criticises men's patriarchal expectations about gendered forms of behaviour in public spaces, including how women dress, how they speak, and how they move, which have an impact on the ways British Bangladeshi women participate in public life and their expressions of leisure. The constraints that some women she works with experience in public spaces lead to the desire for

time and space in which they can get together without men. Thus, by providing additional spaces, the organisation's work adds a layer to the environment of leisure activities, which allows for different gendered expressions of leisure, community, and identity.

As seen in the debate over the *Mela*, it is clear that gender is tightly connected to more or less strict interpretations of religion, which shape how gendered and public expressions of leisure are imagined among the participants included in this study. The women-only events that our participants attend are predominantly attended by Muslim women who follow the principle of *Purdah*. Fatima explained that many attendees of the events prefer to engage in certain embodied practices, such as dancing, outside the public and the male eye:

You are allowed to have fun, and for celebrations you do dance, and you do those kinds of things. But because we come from an Islamic background, our thing is that you can't dance in public, and you can't dance with men.

Obviously, not all Muslim women within the British Bangladeshi community of Tower Hamlets practice gender segregation. Still, participants in this study follow such religious precepts to some extent, as can be observed mostly in their clothing style and the organisation of social life and leisure. Certain leisure activities, such as dance, have been a contested practice within Muslim communities for centuries, for, as Al Faruqi (1978) suggests, dancing can be perceived in opposition to the central tenets of the religion: its emphasis on an austere and simple life. In addition to questions of piety, our research participants also felt the pressure of patriarchy and related expectations on gender behaviours. Asma explained:

If I picture myself dancing in front of him [my husband], what would he do? He would ask: 'You dance? Are you OK? Are you insane?' [laughs]. Maybe if I was more open from the beginning, I don't think it would be like that. He would be OK.

Asma's reflection highlights her husband's expectations of her behaviour based on gender norms, and yet she also believes that they are not set in stone and that there could have been room for

negotiation had she challenged them before. This is a very important observation because it brings to the fore the plurality of interpretations of intersecting religious and gender norms, and the different strategies women can employ to negotiate them. In her study on the gendered organisation of mosques in the UK, Line Nyhagen (2019) observes a reflexive engagement with religious prescription and male power and authority, which echoes Asma's story. We agree with Nyhagen's observation that binary readings of Muslim women's practices as either subordination or resistance are unhelpful categories to make sense of the complexities of their lives and identities and the ever-existing possibility for change. Moreover, in our research, we found that class also plays an important role in people's views on dance, and public dancing. For example, when asked if men and women would dance together in Bangladesh, one Sylheti organiser told us:

No. That would definitely be a no-no in our families and in Bangladesh, this is what our parents used to say, they used to be people, that come to villages and dance, men and women, and they would be considered lower-class people. For us it is that. You come from status family; you don't do that. You can watch it from a distance but you cannot be.

Following such gendered norms around leisure activities derives from complex positionings relating, of course, to a gendered and often patriarchal organisation of life among Muslim British Bangladeshis, but is also connected to questions of class and regional Sylheti culture. However, the role of leisure continues to change and to be adapted, which is testament to the women's reflexive and active engagement with the rules and norms governing their lives in London. Catering to the needs of these women in the borough, this group organises events around gendered and religious prescriptions and at a time of the day during which participants are free from domestic and parental duties.

Questions of class and the structure of domestic life emerge as critical factors influencing our participants' engagement in leisure activities and their involvement with the women's organisation's events. In this respect, our findings reconfirm the aforementioned study on the experiences of British Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets that reports that housewives

struggled to find time and space for leisure activities due to their workload in the house and care for both children and husbands, as well as of other relatives (Phillipson, Ahmed, and Latimer, 2003: 27). According to Farjana, these challenges persist today:

I think it [the Boishakhi Adda] is an escape from my everyday routine. I don't know about most people, but most of my days are at home, and I look forward to these things. It just releases stress. Because the academic year starts and kids go to school and we stay home, and it makes me think that I want to do something else.

Farjana shared that the routines of domestic life and a lack of social networks outside the immediacy of family among married British Bangladeshi women like her can make it hard to find time, space, and companionship for leisure. Like her, many participants shared a desire for a momentary self-exclusion. We want to stress the important but also transient nature of such gendered seclusion. The attendance of women-only events does not mean women like Farjana forsake participating in mixed-gender events entirely or that they are fully determined to live at the margins of society. Momentary but frequent moments of retreat to women-only events allow participants to navigate daily constraints without fully withdrawing from the structures and social groups they belong to. Farjana thus invests Farah with the authority to create opportunities for her to leave daily routines, family duties and community expectations for some hours behind. She underlines the escape that women-only events provide from the stress of domestic life, which is especially important for women with limited social networks, who are heavily involved in domestic labour and, therefore, unable to meet others.

In conclusion, we find that gender segregation and momentary self-exclusion of leisure among the Bangladeshi diaspora in East London allow participants to navigate complex relationships between private and public spaces produced by discourses of gender, religion, and work, as they choose to avoid (male) scrutiny and to release stress without abandoning a set of gendered religious values they follow. The work of Farah and her organisation recognises existing constraints and moral values and is able to bring women together in the community centres of

Tower Hamlets. They actively and creatively shape the area around East London by building organisations and activating spaces in which they engage with local structures, but notably, as in our case, this happens behind closed doors. Such practice creating spaces for women echoes Virginia Woolf's call for 'a room for one's own' (Woolf, 1929: 4). While Woolf's renowned stipulation emerged from reflections on the predicament of (white) women writers in the early 20th century, her argument is a more encompassing one as she draws on the overlapping and gendered dimensions of economy and space which continue to shape women's articulation of identity and agency, and which intersect with questions of race, class and religion for British Bangladeshi women. Many scholars have since emphasised the need for women-only spaces for physical and intellectual safety and freedom (hooks, 1989: 21; Lewis et al., 2015: 7) as well as the importance of girls' privacy for articulations of identity (Garber and McRobbie, 1991: 6, 14). Thinking through this literature, we understand British Bangladeshi women's moments of gendered self-exclusion as a form of politics of location that contributes to the ecology of diverse articulations of belonging in the East End, which we will expand on in the following.

6. The Boishaki Adda: Women negotiating a Politics of Location through Leisure

The organisation of women-only events and their structure differ significantly from how larger and mixed-gender events are organised. Taking a closer look at their organisation, their nature, and framing, we will illustrate how women-only events overcome given constraints and produce gendered communities which synthesise, at times, conflicting forms of identification while allowing for more pluralised notions of belonging outside hardened masculinised fronts structuring diasporic life.

To begin with, no posters or flyers publicise these events in public spaces. Instead, the invitations are shared by (online) word-of-mouth. The organisers rely on an ever-growing network of British Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets, and we observed them approaching potential new attendees at school gates, where they are likely to pick up their children. Another strategy they rely on is networking through a WhatsApp group and a private Facebook group in which their

events are publicised. Digitally networking with attendees, the organisation creates spaces that intertwine the materiality of community centres with spaces on the internet, proving to be a successful strategy in building a women-only community. In the existing scholarship on diasporic communication, internet-based communication is often discussed in terms of its potential to create a sense of belonging among dispersed communities living in different places (Keles, 2015; Bernal, 2006), but we found that these means of communication also play a crucial role for diasporic subjects residing in the same neighbourhood. While not everyone is equally equipped to engage in internet-based communications (Nakamura, 2013: 30), and certainly not all British Bangladeshi women have the same access to and ways of engaging with the internet, it is essential to recognise how diasporic women strategically use the internet to create online rooms to organise themselves and create community.

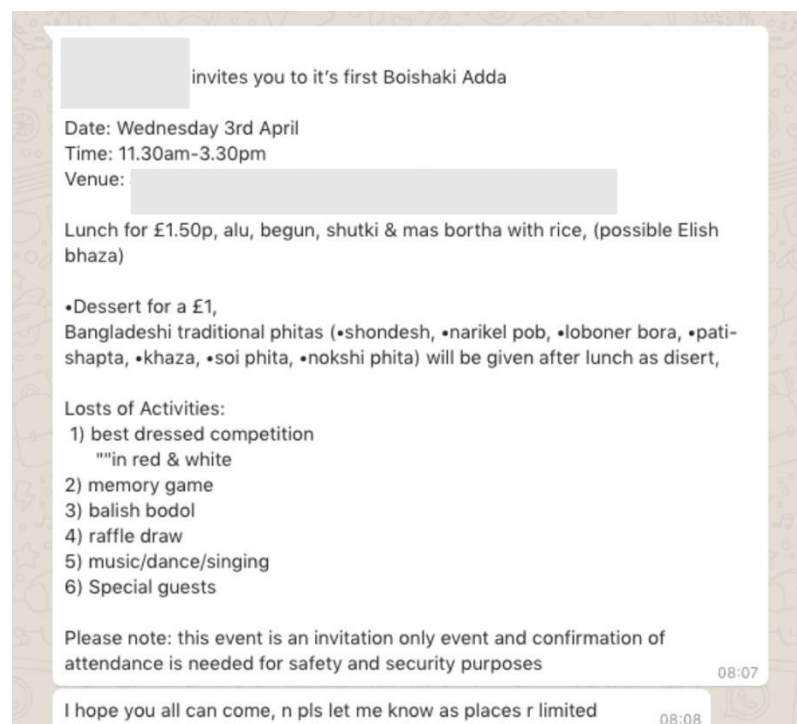


Figure 1: Invitation to Boishaki Adda sent via WhatsApp

Based on their different approaches, the organisation invites up to 300 attendees to events such as the *Boishakhi Adda*. It is crucial to take a closer look at their specific locations – in our case, community centres in Tower Hamlets activated as women-only zones – to understand the effect

leisure has in the negotiations of identity of British Bangladeshi women. Community centres have a long history of enabling imaginative expressions and negotiations of collective identity through the organisation of cultural and/or religious celebrations, language courses, business, politics, music, and the arts (D'Angelo, 2015: 92), and facilitate connections between (diasporic) communities and the wider world (Alexander, 1996: 33; Massey, 2008: 262-3). In this respect, community centres represent an important and pliable locus producing lines of inclusion and exclusion alongside community practices – as such, they are critical to the politics of location of British Bangladeshi women who gather in these spaces, foregrounding their gendered identities.

At these events, we saw women selling home-cooked food, crafts, and jewellery, and often, a henna artist was present, too. Usually, these events come with a dress code. In the case of the above-mentioned *Boishakhi Adda*, attendees were asked to dress in white and red. Some women would come dressed up, but many, including us, would change into party outfits inside the privacy of the community centre. Participating women arrange a bright kaleidoscope of carefully applied makeup, earrings, fake eyelashes and hairpieces in elaborate styles as they prepare for a light-hearted fashion show. Music would be played very loudly and compete with cheerful chatter. As we stood at the margins, catching up with other attendees, Farah often opened the dance floor. With loud Bhangra music followed by Bengali folk songs and contemporary British pop music, the events induced a soundscape synthesising multiple frameworks of belonging. While many joined the dance floor, some preferred observing from the safe margins of the room, as not all women felt comfortable dancing and singing. Some curious bystanders recorded the show with their smartphones, and photos and videos were continuously shared in different social media groups. These events usually end at around 3 pm when many women change back into their day outfits and go to pick up their children from school.

Analysing the dynamics of leisure activities with which participants engaged in these events offers an opportunity to reflect on the different variables involved in British Bangladeshi women's politics of location. A first aspect to focus on is the framing of these as 'detached from politics'. On many occasions, when discussing these women-only events, Farah was adamant that they are

not political, and, therefore, should not be associated with celebrations of political events, such as Bangladeshi Independence Day:

I don't know. I don't like political stuff. I don't want to get into politics. It is just the local ladies they don't want to do it. They say: No, we are doing enough. We don't want to do this.' My work is basically with the local women, and they don't want to do it. It is fine.

This stance on distancing leisurely activities from politics must be understood as a way of locating women-only events outside the realm of politics that accompany larger events such as the *Boishaki Mela*. It is important to clarify that this stance relates specifically to institutionalised politics rather than all forms of politics. Furthermore, Farah's insistence on the unpolitical character of her events was often paired with a remark on their 'non-religious' character, a sign of her awareness of the tensions characterising British Bangladeshi diasporic politics briefly discussed above, but also of her willingness to create an inclusive space for women, regardless of political and religious beliefs. Framing these events as 'not-political' and 'not-religious' allows participating women to work around constraints produced by the masculinised triad of politics, religion, and leisure, which are shaped by hardened discourses between secular and religious British Bangladeshis in the East End (Eade and Garbin, 2006: 190). By momentarily suspending existing tensions from multiple sources of identification, the organiser of the women-only events sets the stage for a pleasurable gendered politics of location. This is in itself a political act, as the organisation allows British Bangladeshi women to get together and carve a space of belonging that foregrounds shared gendered identities more than anything else.

Therefore, the argument that their leisure practices are not political should not be interpreted as indicative of a socially or politically disengaged female diaspora. We argue that these events should not be construed as 'apolitical', the apathetic practice of staying absent of civic activity (Dean, 2014: 454), but as *de-political* – a practice of staying away from the realm of masculinised and institutionalised politics. This shift in conceptualisation recognises British Bangladeshi women's practices of self-exclusion as a strategy to claim alternative spaces and modes of leisure

outside the polarised lines of institutionalised politics and religion that are decades in the making and often dominated by local male leaders that usually do not serve the women of the community. However, claiming exclusive spaces at the margins to synthesise, at times, polarised identities should not be mistaken to exist in isolation, as the organisation's work is tightly networked with the local Council and other organisations. They collaborate with local schools and cultural festivals like *A Season of Bangla Drama*, providing spaces for their events and making women feel like they truly belong. Such collaborations position these 'de-political women-only events' in a dialogue.

Creating a gendered community through leisure organised in the spaces of community centres during the daytime hours, as well as in digital spaces, is a crucial intervention which provides British Bangladeshi women opportunities to meet other women, engage together in leisure activities, and develop a sense of confidence, as Farah shared:

They don't come out, so we get them out, making friends, talking to each other. Basically, it is like confidence building. You help them to become more independent, that is the main aim of the organisation. The first time we did the Saree Day, it was in 2016, and the ladies said: 'We can't, we can't.' So, I had to go first to show them that it is fine to just have fun!

The work of this local organisation enables the development of a sense of community and togetherness, which many research participants say they lack in their daily lives even though they are part of a multi-dimensional ecology encompassing different leisure activities organised by their families and larger community organisations. In contrast to public events such as the *Mela* (organised on a Sunday, when children are at home), which are attended by a mixed-gender audience, these women-only events allow local women to socialise when they are free from childcare duties and outside the domestic sphere. At these events, they come together and engage in practices such as dancing and singing outside the patriarchal gaze without having to worry about transgressing gender codes dictated by various interpretations of religion. Such practices relate to and synthesise different Bengali, South Asian, and British heritages present in

different dance styles, foods, and songs and reflect contemporary gendered multi-layered identities. For participants, leisure experienced under their own terms activates meaningful connections and generates a shared sense of identity that eschews issues between competing views on British Bangladeshi identity that animate the social, cultural, and political landscape of the Bangladeshi diaspora in London.

Lastly, it is important to highlight the nuanced authority of the organisers in such politics of location as they enable leisure practices without prescribing them, allowing different, and, at times, even conflicting interpretations of dance, song, and food to emerge among the women invited at these events. Not all participants like to sing and dance due to different interpretations of Islam. While some participants believe women should not dance in public spaces or in the presence of men, others believe women should not engage in them at all. During the events, we observed discussions about these differences, but importantly, nobody ever left. Leisure becomes a vehicle to articulate and negotiate different views, making them withstandable under the framework of shared womanhood. This represents a distinctive form of politics outside gridlocked debates often advanced by local male leaders. The spaces of these women-only events are pluralised and inclusive of the multiple positions these women occupy at the intersection of gendered, religious, and cultural discourses. Over the years, Farah has observed that these events have allowed participating women to grow more confident and, therefore, more willing to verbalise, navigate, and discuss their positioning in the structures of the politics of location in Tower Hamlets.

7. Conclusion

Inspired by work from the fields of feminist geography and leisure studies, our objective was to contribute to conceptualisations of practices and processes of positioning of identity in the field of diaspora studies. We observed and analysed the complexities of leisure practices and seclusion among British Bangladeshi women in community centres in East London as an expression of a politics of location. We found that the respondents taking part in this study experience many

constraints that prevent them from fully participating in activities organised in public spaces in Tower Hamlets. These constraints are connected to intersecting and competing discourses around gender, religion, class, and national identity, and they, in turn, affect the organisation of domestic and public life. In response, as our research shows, British Bangladeshi women activate material spaces in community centres, and the digital spaces of WhatsApp and Facebook groups function as important loci where they take part in practices of their choice that are organised on their own terms. Relying on these spaces, these women practice *a politics of one's own, in a room of their own* as they avoid becoming subject to male scrutiny when taking part in leisure activities.

Practising momentary self-exclusion from men, which is a key element of these events for the participants, allows them to strategically work at the margins of British Bangladeshi political life in their negotiation of processes of identity and belonging along lines of gender, ethnicity, religion and national identities through leisure. Notwithstanding the fact that British Bangladeshi women are most often pushed to the margins of public life in East London, rather than choosing to occupy this position deliberately, our research highlights the emancipating potential of a degree of 'invisibility' for negotiations of identity and community, which comes with the momentary occupation of a space at the margins of British Bangladeshi public life in reaction to the masculinised expectation of leisure in the public space. Moreover, the fact that Farah positions these events as *de-political* is in itself a political act, as it liberates participants from interacting within the framework of the (masculine) British Bangladeshi politics and allows them to use leisure activities to articulate different gendered expressions of community and identity. Following bell hooks (1989: 34), this position of marginality actively occupied by women taking part in these Saree Days becomes 'a position and place of resistance' that allows for a self-rule in which a *politics of one's own* becomes possible.

8. Ethics Statement

This study received ethical approval from the Ethics Sub-Committee at Loughborough University, R19-P2024.

9. Endnotes

ⁱ MMPI is funded by The Leverhulme Trust (2017-2024); Principal Investigator is Emily Keightley.

ⁱⁱ Approved by Ethics Sub-Committee at Loughborough University, R19-P024.

ⁱⁱⁱ Discos held among British South Asian youth during the day-time hours to work around parental strictness (Huq, 2003:40).

^{iv} A public, mixed-gender New Year's celebration in London. Boishakh referring to the first month of the Bengali calendar.

^v Four of the housewives had been in paid jobs before the research and stopped because of childcare responsibility. Some planned to reprise their roles after maternity leave.

^{vi} *Adda* is a community-based practice often associated with the 20th-century male Bengali middle-class, and their political, artistic, and literary ambitions and exchanges. However, women also organised their own *Addas* (see Chakrabarty, 2009: 194, 204, 207), and, as our example illustrates, they continue to do so in the diasporic space of London.

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11. Table of Figures

Figure 1: Invitation to Boishaki Adda sent via WhatsApp 17