Piety, music and gender transformation: reconfiguring women as culture bearing markers of modernity and nationalism in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT The rise in an intense, textually-based piety, which has become increasingly prevalent in many circles in Bangladesh in the past decade, sees music as taking away from an ideal pious disposition, and therefore considers its removal from everyday life as a requisite to becoming a good Muslim. The removal of music is critically looked upon by secular Bengali Muslims, where singing, especially songs of the Nobel Laureate Tagore, is equated with cultural pride and Bangladeshi nationalism in the secular-liberal, especially the intellectual imaginary. The shunning of such music is thus tantamount to shunning 'Bengaliness' and a source of anxiety for the nationalist. In this article, through a deeper exploration of women's struggles of and sense of achievement in giving up music, I argue that for the women in pursuit of piety, what the act of giving up music speaks to is inner changes that enable them to critically reflect upon roles and relationships that have long been the defining features of a particular kind of middle class, Bengali, feminine self. The paper argues that shunning music is taken as a medium through which women critically rethink their positions at home, reconfigure old roles and expectations and come out of the process with a greater sense of control and ability to write their own identities as Muslim wives and women.

KEYWORDS: Islamic discussion circles, music, piety, textual Islam, jihad, women, gender roles

Introduction

Arifa: People’s hearts [mon] are soft. Songs give rise to a lot of feelings, even if the lyrics are not necessarily lewd [oshil]. It takes the mind to an imaginary place that is removed/disconnected from reality. If there isn’t sufficient awareness [shochetonota] and fear [bhoy] of Allah in one’s heart, one may be tempted to act on one’s imagination, and there in a sin will be committed.

Kakon: Music [gan] should not arouse sexual desires in a person. Being in some imaginary world with lots of sexual feelings aroused can be dangerous.

Reema: That’s why, what is allowed is girlfriends getting together and singing at weddings or other festivities.

Munira: I like listening to Nazrul’s songs. Some days, I play some Nazrul songs to relax and unwind. Islam doesn’t have a problem with songs per se, but with instruments.

Kakon: How can you have songs without instruments? What are you saying?

Munira: (looks guilty) That’s also true... [tao thik].

The above conversation took place between educated and financially solvent women who meet in a religious discussion circle in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The main intent of these women congregating is to actively seek and cultivate piety, a piety the women project as modern, pro-women and detached from the religiosity associated with Islamist groups. In enacting and cultivating a modern, politically neutral piety, women conceptualize music as an unnecessary evil due to its ability to arouse sexual, romantic emotions. Even if the lyrics are
‘safe’, it fosters the creation of a creative space that competes with the focus required for the cultivation of piety. However, the fact that many Bangladeshi women who are cultivating piety and bear outer marks as testimony to it would reject music is met with very sharp reactions. In a casual conversation, a university professor said, ‘Who are these women? It sounds a little excessive to me!’ Another woman said, ‘Why do women have to resort to such extremes? What is this about? Haven’t women been religious in the past? We’ve always been a God-fearing people, but we also are a people with a rich cultural history’. Thus, giving up music is obviously alien to the cultural repertoire of the Bangladeshis that provide such critiques. This article deals with the pious dictate of giving up music pitted against a discussion of the significance of music in the cultural and national landscape.

In this paper, I argue that giving up music and the negative reactions to it can be understood on two levels. The first is the political level where music represents certain ideals of secularism, progressive nationalism and therefore modernity in the public, political imaginary. However, I point out that the manner in which music and singing by women plays into constructs of nationalism and modernity does not accompany a corresponding understanding of women’s sense of self, which brings me to the second level at which discarding music is to be understood – the very personal level at which women understand what it means for them to be women.

In Bangladesh, ‘middle-class’ families employing a tutor to teach their young children, especially their daughters, to sing, has been quite a common cultural practice. The majority of the women that are a part of my research claimed that they have, at some point in their lives, learnt to sing either from a tutor who came to the home, or that they attended one of the reputed schools for singing. When asked about the changes adopted in the pursuit of piety, interestingly, giving up singing and any other kind of association with it came up strongly as one of the activities they have been struggling to discard. In this paper, I delve into the architecture of discarding music in general and singing in particular, with women’s accounts of the corollaries that accompanied its removal from everyday life. In going beneath the surface of religious injunctions, the paper explores how women conceptualize singing as having gendered them in particular ways and what is happening to the construction of the feminine self now that the practice of music is no longer a part of their social and familial landscape. In tracking the changes of the feminine self through engagement with cultural practices such as singing, the article sheds light on how norms of piety override and change older gendered norms and gives new meaning to what it means to be a woman, simultaneously problematizing dominant notions of modernity and nationalism.

Music and singing in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, members of the urban middle class make a distinction between religious and secular music while taking up singing. If women want to sing religious songs, the genre of choice would generally be *hamd* or *nath*. While singing *hamd* or *nath* is a common part of religious rituals such as *milads*, or the commemoration of the prophet Muhammad’s birthday, this genre of music is not cultivated as an artistic form. Rather, when we see *hamd* or *nath* being performed on television, it is done by artists who are known primarily as singers of Nazrul or Tagore’s songs. Nazrul is Bangladesh’s national poet, and the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, although from West Bengal, is a part of most middle-class lives and homes through his works of literature and songs. When women cultivate music as an art form, it is usually classical Indian, Tagore and Nazrul that they choose to train themselves in. The significance of such singing – notably the branching out to Nazrul and/or Tagore – has to be understood on the basis of the complex and variegated ways in which both Nazrul and Tagore have occupied spaces in the political and national imaginary.
Born to different faiths, the works of both Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore called for tolerance between faiths and communities, especially in the spirit of freedom from colonial rule. Gulam Murshid (2007) argues that in many respects, Nazrul was more revolutionary, where he called for a religion based on humanity that would transcend all kinds of organized religion. As a result of his critical stance towards organized religion, he often incurred the wrath of Muslims in his era, earning the label of 'Kafer Kazi' (Kazi the infidel). However, ironically, when India was being divided along religious lines, the demand for a separate nation state for Muslims saw Nazrul represent the national struggle of Muslims. However, the Nazrul that was appropriated as part of this struggle was a divided and partial Nazrul, where only particular works of his were privileged while his syncretistic devotional songs (shyamsangeet, kirton, etc) were completely overlooked. Murshid writes (in Bengali), 'The same Nazrul who in the 1920s was insulted as an emissary of Nimrod, Pharaoh and Satan, became a pro-reform Muslim in the 1950s' (Murshid 2007: 167). According to Murshid, Nazrul’s Muslim identity, at the complete elision of his pro-humanity/universal religion stance, was in fact, a means of keeping the Bengali masses distracted and away from Tagore (Murshid 2007: 166).

Rabindranath Tagore posed a threat to the unity of a people that was brought and kept together through recourse to religious solidarity. By drawing on the ‘Bengali’ ethos of the East Pakistanis, Tagore’s work had the power to validate a collective identity of the East Pakistanis through means other than Islam. In other words, as the Muslim identity ceased to be unifying, there was apprehension amongst the Pakistani ruling elite that the Bengali Muslims may draw on their Bengaliness to assert rights that the authorities were intent upon keeping from them. The seeds of discontent and the claim for a separate cultural-linguistic identity had already been sown in the language movement of 1952, when the Pakistani army opened fire on, and killed, a troupe of protesters who took to the streets against the ruling that Pakistan will have only one state language and that would be Urdu. The Bengali need to be validated through language made the authorities acutely aware of the deep resonance of the ‘Bengali’ amongst the Muslim Pakistanis of Bengali origin and ethnicity. The State thus began an overt campaign suppressing works and celebrations of Tagore. Some examples include the banning of Tagore’s songs on national radio, the festive commemoration of Tagore’s birthday, and even debates over whether universities should include Tagore’s work in their literature syllabi (Murshid 2007: 138).

In the midst of such obstacles, Tagore and his work gained a new significance. Murshid writes, ‘Tagore’s name became the mantra of protest. The government’s resistance to Tagore had exactly the opposite effect. The people of East Bengal, much more than ever in the past, made Tagore their very own. Not through reading him in text books, the Bengali Muslims owned Tagore through protest and struggle’ (Murshid 2007: 138). With Tagore as an emblem of ethnic identity and a burgeoning nationalism, the cultural struggle made headway in several ways. For example, there were mass movements by intellectuals and cultural activists that culminated in the formation of institutes such as Chhayanaut. Then there were women holding up the torch of cultural assertion by wearing the sari and teep (mark on forehead) as well as singing Tagore’s songs (Kabeer 1991). Tagore’s songs were sung by both men and women. However, it was women’s practice that came to symbolize subversion and resistance. In other words, in keeping with the manner in which women are subsumed within dominant narratives on modernity and nationalism, respectable women’s bodies became a legitimate site of national contestation and representative of nationalist agendas (Siddiqi 2009: 17). Thus, women were brought to the fore of the political struggle that would give birth to a new nation.

The ‘constructed’ idea that women were agents of modern nation building overlooked several things. First, women’s projection as culture bearing resisters of state supremacy unfortunately did not accompany any corresponding interest in women’s rights in general
Next, the relationship between singing as a cultural act and women’s agency in undertaking it is made to appear natural to what Bengali women do. However, scholarly work on the topic as well as personal insights prove otherwise. Sumanta Banerjee, writing about the changing place of popular culture in the lives of 19th-century Bengali women argues that once a Bengali woman became educated, gained access to western literature and climbed up the class hierarchy to become a bhadramahila, she distanced herself from women of the lower classes and the forms of popular culture they would engage in together. Her new class positioning and new cultivations meant that ‘A bhadramahila’s cultural pursuits acquired a private chamber character. The collective gaiety of a panchali session was narrowed into individual compositions to be appreciated by the husband and his friends, or to be printed in magazines to be read by the educated few’ (Banerjee 1989: 167). Thus, cultural activities may have become more ‘sophisticated’, but they also became more private and therefore distinct from the more public cultural pursuits of lower class women, which were now looked upon unfavorably as vulgar and licentious. The bhadramahila, through her cultural undertakings, espoused and manifested a particular brand of womanhood (Banerjee 1989: 165). When cultural acts then come out into the public space, as they did with Bengali women’s protest to Pakistani authorities, what happens to that womanhood? Did it no longer risk being vulgarized because the times had changed? I feel that the elapse of time is probably not an adequate explanation as casual conversations with women undertaking cultural acts such as singing and dancing do reveal the tensions and debates around the appropriateness of Bengali Muslim women’s performances. Many argue that women who were performing and in public were already from ‘good enough’ families, and thus had immunity. However, the question remains: what was the immunity against? What are some of the tensions around notions of womanhood, femininity, women’s bodies, their chastity and sexuality that had to be negotiated before women were allowed to become public culture bearers of political protest? In the dominant narrative on women partaking in promoting ethnic solidarity and contributing towards the birth of a new nation, an understanding of these negotiations, i.e. women’s own formulations of and negotiation in their sense of self, do not come to the fore.

**Culture, state and a debated Islam**

With inadequate insights into ideas of femininity and womanhood, upon the independence of Bangladesh, the dominant discourse on nationalism marched on to take an even stronger stance against the parochial form of Islam that the Pakistani state had been trying to impose to crush the movement for Bangladesh. This stance first banned all kinds of religious forces from participating in the formal political arena, leading to a ban on the Jama’at-e-Islami which had collaborated with the Pakistani junta against the liberation of Bangladesh (Ahmed 1994). Next, the constitutional adoption of ‘secularism’ was also taken as an official marker of the new nation’s religious openness.

While many were quick to equate secularism with the absence of religion, the state reacted and defended its position by arguing that secularism did nor refer to a lack of faith, but rather promoted a more open and tolerant kind of Islam. This Islam was to be compatible with markers and bearers of cultural identity. In addition, the term referred to the ‘exclusion of communal forces from politics’ and the freedom of all individuals to practice their respective faiths in private (O’Connell 2001). However, critics were not appeased. The dialogue between government/liberal forces and the masses was tantamount to a debate on whether the place Islam had been given in the state represented the sentiments of its ‘faithful’ citizens. In the midst of these debates, especially by the end of the Mujib era, ‘Muslim assertiveness in public life’ was on the rise (O’Connell 2001: 189).
The assertion of the Muslim self is seen as an ‘assertion’ primarily because the Islamic identity gained greater public presence. One of the public manifestations was a critique of the role of music and performance in private as well as public life. An extreme example of this was the bombing of the largest and most highly attended Pohela Boishakh (Bengali New Year) celebration in Dhaka in 2002. The JMB – a militant outfit that seeks to establish the rule of sharia in the country – claimed responsibility. Thus, ‘giving up culture’ is often equated with these extremist, Islamist positions, and thereby it is a source of great surprise when ‘modern’, ‘educated’ women who are clearly not terrorists are drawn to such injunctions. While the general tendency is to equate these prohibitions with the moralizing rhetoric and consequent activism of Islamists, I argue that there is greater insight to be gained by looking deeper – at how these injunctions speak to the shaping of the self.

In post-liberation Bangladesh (1971–present) women’s role in representing modernity and nationalism has continuously and systematically elided women’s own sense of self as they are made to carry forward development initiatives, receive micro credit and become entrepreneurs, contribute to export earnings through their labor in the ready-made garments (RMG) industries (Kabeer 1991; Siddiqi 2000). In the omissions of essential understandings of womanhood, there were several stakeholders. Western donors had their priorities to privilege the development agencies, while the State straddled between appeasing the donor and lending support to increasing Islamist rhetoric influenced by the oil-rich Middle East. Thus, the discourse on women ‘emphasized women’s needs, leaving the relationship between needs and notions of womanhood unexplored’ (Jahan 1995: 103). Given this lacuna, the different stakeholders pressed for their different ideas and initiatives, underlying which there were different notions of womanhood, albeit not made explicit as part of their plan.

The Islamist position on women, again represented principally through the Jama’at-e-Islami, is based on the ideology that ‘gender roles are divinely ordained, as legitimized through religious tradition and laws. In this view, men and women were created unequal by God, so any attempt to bring equality is heretical’ (Jahan 1995: 104). Such a view thus renders gender hierarchy fixed, thereby precluding any possibility of transformation that benefits women. In living religious precepts, women thus become automatons, always accepting both the precepts as well as conditions of subordination. The stringency of such a discourse on women has been linked to the ‘Islamic onslaught’ on women by way of attacks on NGOs, fatwas and the famous Taslima Nasrine case. Thus, the Islamic discourse on women and gender is seen as a retrogressive one that is oppressive and anti-modern.

Existing ethnographic accounts of the decreased practice of singing in rural Bangladesh argue that injunctions on performance and singing also affect the self in negative ways, leading to a loss of an avenue for articulating and expressing subversion of gender relations (Gardener 1998). Built into this conclusion are normative assumptions of ideal gender relations and the nature of subversion. Resistance and subversion have long been tropes through which women’s agency has been analyzed within anthropology as well as in feminist accounts (Abu Lughod 1990). However, as Saba Mahmood points out, when this formula of agency is applied on women enacting piety, we see that agency describes a ‘whole range of human action including those which may be socially, ethically or politically indifferent to the goals of opposing hegemonic norms’ (Mahmood 2005: 9). Thus, Mahmood proposes that rather than approaching norms through the lens of subversion, we focus on the variegated ways in which norms are inhabited, revealing the grammar of particular actions, enabling us to discern the nuances that mark the consolidating as well as subverting aspects within each action.

Through the cases I present, I delve into the grammar of giving up music by exploring women’s motivations and the intended and unintended consequences of the action. In unearthing the mechanics of discarding music at a deeper level, I argue for the importance
of understanding religious injunctions not (only) on the basis of uncritical equation with Islamists’ moralizing (often violent) presence in the public space, but (also) through a closer engagement with how the pursuit of piety speaks to formulations and notions of the self. In these formulations that I will argue are ripe with strife, deliberation, assertion and a sense of fulfillment and triumph in overcoming obstacles, there is a reformulation of womanhood that women feel very positive about. Given such assertive and positive transformations of the self, I ask for a problematizing of the dominant view that giving up music is anti-progress, anti-modern and thereby anti-nation.

Religious injunctions

The women from the lesson circles believe that the need to stop listening to and singing songs derives from a Hadith that asks the believer to refrain from ‘lawh’ – an Arabic word denoting pastime or diversion. In the Hadith, ‘lawh’ specifically contains instruments of music. However, the Hadith also mentions emotions that arise out of listening to the instruments of music, and by extension music in general. Listening to music falls into the same category as devouring others’ wealth, treacherous behavior, and drinking wine. Music and immoral behavior are thus intermingled.

In my research groups, based on the degree of involvement with music, I have found women belong to three camps. The first consists of the practitioners: the ones who have trained in a particular genre of music; the second is the passionate listener: the ones who spend significant amounts of time listening to music and claim to have (had) a real emotional connection to their preferred genre of music and songs; and third: the ones who are less dependent on it, but who claim to listen just because it is on, for whom it may function as ‘background noise’. It was the practitioners and the avid listeners for whom music held the greatest appeal. It was this category that struggled the most in removing it from their everyday lives. Women look back to reflect on the positive effects discarding music has had on their sense of self, morality and ability to assert themselves to family members. Through the two in-depth cases I present, I will shed light on what aspects of moral behavior the abandoning of music has redressed, and the manner in which leaving music has reclaimed the morality of the female, Muslim self.

Arifa: gender relations and the inner self

Arifa married into a family that was very musical. Her ‘Bengali’ identity was strengthened by the fact that her father was killed by Pakistani forces in the independence war of 1971. Her father-in-law was known to her father, and therefore was sympathetic about the fact that she had lost her father in the war. Arifa says that her father-in-law – a lawyer – was a serious but fair man and was respected by his peers for his principles. Of all the members amongst her in-laws, he was the most religious. However, Arifa’s mother-in-law was from West Bengal, and was the one who brought music into the home. Arifa says, ‘My mother-in-law really enjoyed music and would host musical soirees (jolsha) in our home – but only when my father-in-law was away in the village’. Here, we see the not-so-uncomfortable coexistence of a ‘strict Islamic’ way with the ‘Bengali’ inclination towards music – a Bengali-ness that is bolstered by its association with West Bengal. While Arifa’s mother-in-law waited for her husband’s retreat to the village in order to ‘live out’ her Bengali-ness, it is noteworthy that she was allowed to do that – signaling a mutual respect, even when inclinations were different.

It is in this setting that Arifa took up music. She says that her husband was generous with money and extremely interested (shoukheen). He played the guitar and his record (LP) collection filled several rooms in the house. A few years after their marriage and the birth of
her first child, when she wanted to pursue singing, he was obviously very encouraging. Arifa’s musical genre of choice was Tagore’s songs (*Rabindra Sangeet*). She first trained with a tutor at home, and within a few years employed Sadeq – one of the best Rabindra Sangeet artists in the country – to train her at home. She claims that her voice had really developed well and that Sadeq was very pleased with her progress. As her musical guru (master), Sadeq began to promote her at cultural events. Arifa says,

I was totally caught up in singing at these events. Sometimes rehearsing for them meant that I had to stay out late, and put in long hours into practicing at home as well as outside the home. My children were small. There were times when I would not be able to nurse my baby properly because I had to attend rehearsals. Sadeq was making arrangement so that I could cut a record and become a radio and television artist.

This is the point at which her husband intervened, accusing her of overdoing it. He asked her to stop performing at cultural events and to restrict her singing to the home and familial circles. Arifa was outraged. She angrily asked her husband why then he had allowed her to train and come this far, to which her husband responded that singing was primarily for herself. She argued,

How can I sing for myself. That doesn’t make sense. Music is inherently for others. Songs are sung as gifts [*upohar*] to be presented to others. If one cultivates one’s talent for singing, she must spread [*vikashito kora*] that talent [*protibhita*] around. I realized that it is possible to hold another person in a spell through music. And what’s wrong with that, as long as one’s intentions [*uddeshsha*] were noble – and mine always were.

Arifa’s last sentence is very telling, revealing the sexual tension that performative singing carries. However, Arifa also redeems her role as a performer by de-essentializing performance and lending it credibility by bringing in the moral character of the performer. In other words, while Arifa insists on taking her singing beyond the personal, she contains its sexual potential and connotations as it traverses from private to public through a recourse to intentions and motivations – inner states that exist as distinct from the act of singing. In other words, Arifa’s retort against her husband was founded upon the argument that singing per se was not problematic; and while, through her talent, she imparted music as a gift, she could still continue to be a virtuous woman, and thereby continue to sing.

The point on which Arifa felt unable to negotiate with her husband centered not on the question of her morality, but her domestic responsibilities. The fact that she herself brings up the fact that she would sometimes not be able to nurse her baby, or stay out late (implying the neglect of duties such as being around for the family at meal times), signals the hold these duties have over women’s lives. Interestingly, when her husband was trying to curtail her singing, the dialogue that transpired between the two reflected a conflation of one with the other. In other words, by singing in public Arifa was being negligent towards the home and family, and by extension risking her morality. While Arifa felt strongly about defending her moral character, she was less sure about the domestic duty part.

Arifa, albeit unsure about her performance as wife and mother, did not take her husband’s dictate (that she should sing only at home and for herself) lying down. She reacted in a passive-aggressive manner by not singing at all and telling Sadeq, her teacher, that she was not home whenever he came to the house to give lessons. Arifa felt tremendous resentment towards her husband. Hers was a classic case of middle-class propriety where women’s roles and sexual morality are intertwined in a way that women find difficult to separate and break out of. She felt powerless in front of her husband, and fought back by resisting and rejecting the opportunities (with limits) that he was allowing her.

Soon after the upsetting and defeating episode over her musical pursuit came Hajj. Arifa says, ‘Hajj was the start of the miracle’ that marked her entire journey through piety. It was at Hajj that Arifa felt overwhelmed with emotions and awe. After Hajj she started to
read and think and change. She says, ‘I now realize that my husband was right about the singing’.

From a woman who initially resisted her husband’s dictates and even rejected his conciliatory advances, what are we to make of Arifa’s present stance that her husband had been right all along? It is important to point out at the outset that Arifa’s admission of her husband being correct comes from her obedience not to him, but what she believes are God’s dictates. In her mind she had not conceded to her husband, but to God – a concession that would have been made even if her husband had not reacted the way he had. To strengthen this point, Arifa does not forget to add that, after Hajj, her husband, whose LP collection was too large for the many rooms that housed them, also gave up listening to music. In other words, the giving up of music applied equally to both spouses, thereby removing from it the burden of representing gender hierarchy and nullifying the notion that it was a mere re-enactment of a male (husband’s) injunction to women. She asserts that the post-Hajj transformation was even more severe in her husband. However, after going through an intense period, he has reverted to some of his old ways. Arifa says, ‘due to the influence of his family, many of his worldly fancies [shoukhinoto] have found their way back into his life. He now buys CDs again and listens to music’, while Arifa describes herself as going from ‘strength to strength’. Thus, interestingly, while her husband is the one who wanted her to curtail her singing, they both showed strength and conviction and left music by yielding to divine authority. However, it was Arifa and not her husband who has been able to keep the conviction alive. It is she who now advises him on what is good and beneficial – not for the home, or in this world, but for his soul.

I asked her what she gained from letting go of music. In response, Arifa dispelled the original argument she had made in favor of music by asserting an a priori interiority, separable from the effects of music. She says,

I know and always knew that music had the power to create feelings and emotions. For example, when we sang at the music school that I used to attend in the early years, I used to see the wife of a prominent actor whose life was public information. She never said anything but sang and cried. Maybe she was thinking of her marriage, or her autistic child. So, music does make you feel things – I saw that with my own eyes. It can heal as well as open the self up to wounds and vacancies, where the lyrics of the songs, rather than words of God fill in the gaps.

I asked Arifa how damaging the pursuit of music could have been; she replied,

Maybe the time away from my husband and children would have just made me more indifferent to my duties. Once indifference crept in, who knows what could have happened – especially given the power music and singing had on me – even though I denied it at the time. Of course, music aroused emotions and sensitivities – why else was I so enamored by it? Maybe the discord would have broken my home [shongshar].

Here, we see Arifa’s behavior in two phases of her life. The first phase is marked by the absence of the cultivation of piety and the prevalence of the desire to sing. The focus at the time ended with singing. The ‘extra-musical association’ (De Bano 2005: 445) was overshadowed by pulling in uddeshho or intention, which Arifa at the time considered to be noble. Once religion enters the scene, we see that intentions are questioned in light of her new found knowledge. Thus, ‘intention is not only a means to faith and a way of establishing relationship with God, but is also a rational and controlling process’ (Torab 1996: 241). Her reconfigured intentions thus not only control her world but also give new meaning to old practices and responsibilities.

Arifa’s assertion that the abandonment of music may have saved her home through a refocusing on domestic duties may sound like a strengthening of patriarchal understandings leaving little room for change. However, for Arifa, while many of the duties consisted
of the same activities, the assumptions underlying them and the expectations shaping them changed. She thinks back to her own life and claims that she was highly praised for her singing. The praise she received was also extended to her other abilities – such as her cooking, her ability to maintain a good home, design clothes, dress nicely, etc. Arifa says, ‘I behaved as though I was unfazed by the praises, and acted humbly. But inside I was gloating, which I now believe must have also fuelled my endeavors’. She now claims to be embarrassed by it all. She says,

Now I avert praises. It is due only to Allah. Behind the satisfaction of receiving praises lie other not so pleasant things – such as competition. I began singing around the same time as my husband’s sister [nonad] and his brother’s wife [ja]. While I would never admit it at the time, we were all very competitive. I now think that the competitive streak was disguised but also pushed us all to excel, at the end of which we were never happy about others’ achievements, and therefore never fulfilled with our own. Is that the person I am supposed to be? Before I used to just cook and cook, and constantly invite people for dinner parties. I used to say that I do it because I like it. Everyone praised me for being a good housewife [shangsharik], But who has asked women to be SO into their homes [shangsharik]? Surely not Allah – because he knows us and knows what in our hearts motivates us. Having returned from a difficult world [kothin jogot], and fought with my heart [mon], my nafs, through the labor [porisrom] of my nafs (and not the labor of cooking, entertaining and singing), I am now content and fulfilled [poritripto]. In that world [jogot], the motivations came from competition, and the need to show off, within and outside of the family. The natural progression of competition was jealousy [hingsha].

Abandoning music has made Arifa reflect upon the other tasks she undertook, categorizing them all not as duties/acts in the private or public sphere, but as acts from a particular and peculiar world (jogot) that affected the inner-self in negative ways. It is the inner-self that she feels able to have affected. And having affected positive changes, she feels that the relevance those acts had as forming her role and thus herself does not carry the same weight. Thus, she still cooks and invites people to visit, and even takes pleasure in doing so, but the grammar of these acts is very different. By making a conscious effort of averting praise, she feels that her roles and duties, while serving practical needs, are primarily for Allah, whereby she is a mere instrument of Allah’s will. However, her submission to Allah’s will has come through labor – ‘the labor of nafs’ – and it has enabled a transcendence of power relations between herself and her husband and his family, that were once instrumental in defining the various acts she undertook in her role as wife, in-law and woman.

Suhaila: does my husband have haya towards his beautiful wife?

Much like the other participants of the Quran learning circles, Suhaila grew up in a home where religious rituals such as prayer and fast were performed and festivities observed. However, other aspects of her day-to-day existence were not influenced by religious doctrine or dictate. She attended a co-education school, had different kinds of friends and went to parties. Her home was extremely musical, where both parents were into singing and dancing. Both Suhaila and her sister were trained in Indian classical music since childhood. Suhaila’s sister went abroad and became a popular recording artist. Suhaila, who was very beautiful, was married off to an older, wealthy businessman after her A-levels. Upon marriage she proceeded to have three children, travel the world with her husband, host dinner parties and musical soirees and perform other social and familial duties. Through these activities, all of which together in combination can place demands on one’s time, Suhaila kept up her music. She practiced with a teacher every morning, and once a year, for three months she and her sister would pay to bring in a well-known maestro from another country to train with him. She says, ‘Singing was my passion. It was my piece of heaven and
when I sang I felt like I was carried away to another world, a better place’. Other than giving her psychological peace, singing also gave her recognition amongst her family and friends. Her talent marked her out from the rest of the crowd. Although she never sang professionally, she would often sing for a gathering of friends. Her husband was very proud of her singing. She narrates, ‘He not only loved to hear me sing, he also likes to show off my talent to our friends’. Thus, like Arifa, Suhaila also acknowledges the role of praise and recognition as a catalyst to (performative) singing.

With her engagement with religion she learnt that singing was not allowed, and that all musical instruments are forbidden. She says, ‘Giving up singing was a very difficult thing for me and it took a long time for me to feel comfortable with the decision not to sing. It had become a habit, and it was the one thing that I really excelled in. And yes, it felt great when people said that I had the voice of a nightingale’. Suhaila said that she was not able to give it up overnight. Initially, she claims that she used to go by the dictate that no one else (especially men) should hear her. She then would sit alone and sing for herself. However, she says, ‘It simply was not working. The fact that I sang, I kept wanting to do more of it. It was an addiction. The more I sang, the more I wanted to sing, and I knew that one day the addiction would land me in front of others again. I knew that I had to have God’s words – his music to fill my heart with, and decided to do recitation [telawat] of the Quran’.

When I asked her why her heart should be filled with only the Quran, and why she did not continue to sing the devotional songs whereby music and singing could have been a permissible part of her piety, Suhaila replied the following:

I did not have enough of an understanding of Allah. Without that, whenever I sang, whatever the contents were, I would always fall into the traps of shaitan [Satan]. The singing would be personal and deep – but only and always about me. However engrossed I was in the singing, even if I was in front of no one – my pleasure would come from my deep awareness of my own abilities by which I carried a tune, which in turn transported me somewhere else. I couldn’t move away from the ‘I’ in the singing. The condition of Telawat – that it shouldn’t be so melodious that the melody rather than the message transfixes helped me through my jihad of being torn between wanting to sing and giving it up, and to be able to keep myself balanced within it.

Unlike Arifa, whose initial impetus to give up music came, much to her displeasure, from her husband, for Suhaila the situation was quite the opposite. Suhaila’s husband enjoyed her singing, both for himself as well as the pleasure of others. She says,

When I decided to give up singing, I was worried about how my husband would take it. One day when I refused to sing in a gathering, he was fuming with anger. When we came home he brought the harmonium to our room, put it on the bed and insisted that I sing right then and there. I was quite intimidated, but good sense prevailed and I brought down the verse from the Quran and the Bukhari containing the Hadith forbidding singing and [Alhamdulilah] thank God he backed off. He now supports my not singing anymore. See, if you use God’s words, He always finds solutions for difficulties.

Thus, in this case it was the wife whose initiative influenced the husband. Suhaila felt that giving up music, and being able to convince her husband that she was doing the right thing, reflected deeper changes that affected the very constitution of her marriage. She narrates,

One day I was singing in a gathering. I was wearing a white and red sari with bright red lipstick, my hair hanging loose on my shoulder. I know I looked like an angel. Then I began to sing, my favorite ragas, with a kind of passion that even the blind and deaf could sense. The men in the audience were neither blind, nor deaf. They were totally taking it in. And all the while I told myself that none of this was happening. After the (stunning) performance, a male guest came up to me and said, ‘when you sang, the wind stopped blowing and the
birds stopped chirping!’ And my husband was there standing next to me and gloating. I told
myself at the time that he was proud of me and showing me off. It’s alright – a husband can
and should be proud of his wife. But what should be the basis of this pride and showing off?
Surely not another man’s lust for his wife!!!? Where was the ‘haya’ in my marriage? What was
my husband doing to safeguard it? Is that the man he is supposed to be?

_Haya_ is an Arabic word that can be found in several accounts of the cultivation of an
Islamic disposition (Gole 2004; Mahmood 2005; Deeb 2006). Translated as modesty, the
term is invoked when discussing comportment related to dressing and behaving and in
contexts where women have to interact with men. Here I emphasize the ‘have to’ because
the dominant thinking in these circles is that one must follow dictates from the Quran and
hadith meticulously, and thereby minimize interaction with men. The evidence for Quranic
dictate is verse 53, Sura Al-Ahzab, which asks the prophet’s wives to take anything they
need from unrelated men from behind a screen. This command is bolstered by verse 30
from Sura Nur, which asks women to lower their gaze and to not reveal their ‘adorn-
ments’ to anyone other than certain mentioned men. Both verses, in combination, are
advocated as the commands that set the limits of modesty. While almost all the women
studied agree that this dictate needs to be implemented with the practicalities of today’s
world in mind (such as work, co-education schools and universities, accepted modes of
sociability), Suhaila’s (amongst others’) use of _haya_ within marriage draws from the
conventional sense in which the term is used to infuse new meaning to the marital unit.
For example, in Suhaila’s case, the understanding that women must follow certain condi-
tions while interacting with men, and the recognition that in the context of her perfor-
mance and the interaction with men that ensued, she was breaking the conditions, did
more than compromise the modesty that should have characterized that particular interac-
tion. The compromised modesty leading from a covert desire the man may have harbored
towards Suhaila, in turn took away from the strength of the husband-wife relationship.
Looking back, what outrages Suhaila was that her husband was participating in this ‘shar-
ing of his wife!’ She says,

How could we think that any of this was innocent. You know the _hadith_ that says that when
an unrelated man and woman are alone, the third present is always _shaitan_ [Satan]. You see
men do whatever makes them look and feel good. It is male arrogance and chauvinism that
rules. And they get to choose – regardless of how it makes their wives look, regardless of
what about their wife is being validated.

Suhaila’s statement reveals quite a bit about how many marriages are constituted in the
middle to upper classes, amongst which I conducted my research. In many of the lectures
and discussions I attended, it was mentioned several times that marriages have become
materialistic, shallow and devoid of the kind of love and affection that Islam lays out as
ideal. In the mosque group, which consisted of mainly married women with young to adult
children, the teacher spoke harshly about how wives these days ‘demand, instigate
husbands to accept bribes, and get caught up in the trimmings of the world (duniya).’ The
husbands, who were corrupt, in turn, indulged in the world in their own ways as well as
through showering the wives with material goods. The result would be that wives would
become ‘trophy wives’ – a show, and bearers of men’s achievements. While most women
contend that the wives become ‘trophy wives’ due to patriarchal pressures and expecta-
tions, the teachers call upon the women to take the power back into their hands, and change
the rules of the game altogether. In other words, the women were called to reflect upon and
change the foundations of their marriages, which was to begin by changing oneself and
then converting their husbands into better Muslims and better men.

Suhaila drew great strength from the fact that she was the initiator of change in her
marriage. She says,
First I had to do the hard job of changing myself – leaving things that were dear to me, seeing the logic and reasoning behind new ways and doing things differently. Then I realized that unless my husband changes, it would be very difficult for me to lead an Islamic life. And so I began to work on my husband. But it had to be done very cleverly, without being too assertive, without making him feel that I was taking the power back, without rocking the boat – if you know what I mean. And the entire time I prayed – the countless times I woke up for Tahajjud. And Allah answered my prayer.

Suhaila’s husband’s transformation is talked about by everyone that knows them. At one time known for his boisterous ways, his affinity for lively company and a good alcoholic drink, he now prays five times a day, has performed his Hajj and given up alcohol. In subsequent years, Suhaila assumed the role of a preacher. She gives Islamic talks in several places, and has even gone abroad to receive informal training from preachers. She says,

My family is still most important, and with years of praying and persevering, my husband now believes and practices as I do. And it doesn’t end there ... He looks up to me with authority. The other day when someone asked him about a verse of the Quran, he said, ‘Ask Suhaila’. Can you imagine that? I am so grateful to God.

Thus, Suhaila’s journey from a beautiful singing socialite to a preacher and wife who feels in greater control of setting the rules is marked by a strife to overcome her own desires as well as a rethinking of how she as a woman was affecting herself as well as her marriage and others around her. The story encapsulated in the singing narrative addresses not only singing as an exclusive and solitary act, but the relationships in the larger world within which singing occurs.

Conclusion: the nation and its (un)singing women

In Bangladesh, understandings of womanhood have been subsumed by dominant development paradigms and initiatives that offer the promise of improving women’s lives and representing modernity and progress for the nation. As Lara Deeb (2006: 30) writes, ‘Measuring modern-ness by the “status of women” assumes a universal standard of measure, one that is based upon a particular liberal western feminist notion of emancipation and liberation’. The sidelining of insights into women’s own sense of self has occurred at the privilege of an image of the woman en route to liberation, who participates in the labor force, frequents the cinema, and buys make-up (Feldman 2001: 222). The route to liberation, however, does not mark a linear trajectory. Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood (2002) draw our attention to this non-linear pathway by critiquing the academic definitions of concepts of liberation and emancipation, which she argues are based on the premise of universal desire for women. They aim to redress the academic parochialism and write, ‘We tend to forget that the particular set of desires, needs, hopes and pleasures that liberals and progressives embrace do not necessarily exhaust the possibilities of human flourishing’ (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002: 353). In the dominant constructs that have framed women’s flourishing in Bangladesh, religion had not received a warm welcome. As pointed out earlier in the article, academic accounts, political debates, along with the popular imaginary have relegated a place for religion where Islam represents phenomena such as fatwas and Islamist terror attacks – phenomena denoting only that which is passive and oppressive for women.

The ethnographic section points out that becoming religious, for the women of the discussion circles, has had positive effects for women on two levels. The first area that has been touched upon is the inner self. In understanding the transformations of the inner self, the women’s use of the term jihad is useful. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, jihad for these women does not mean armed battle. Rather, jihad is an inner struggle that involves
deploying one’s time, talents and energies in cultivating piety through obedience to textual edicts. For Arifa and Suhaila, the desire to obey what they believe to be God’s words involves internal struggles, at the end of which they feel more humble and more modest, these virtues being attained through ego effacement. Arifa experiences and attains humility by realizing that her role in the home, and especially in relation to her in-laws, was excessive. The fact that she constantly strove to be a better cook, a better hostess, is now seen as acts of competition and therefore a source of mental and emotional turmoil. She now strives to discard her earlier domestic endeavors so that she may deploy her energies to attain closeness to God. Through that process, Arifa finds new self-awareness as well as a new understanding of her role and responsibilities within the home.

Suhaila’s struggle to give up music leads her to think that she too has become more humble, by learning to live without praises, by ‘taking away the I’ from her life. In addition, she has altered the dynamics in her marital relationship, based upon a critical reflection on the past. She now feels that her marriage then, in sync with the expectations and socio-cultural standards of the wider society she belongs to, was materialistic and shallow. She argues that her relationship with her husband was shallow because it was based, among other things, upon others’ validation of each other. She redresses the superficiality by putting a curtain between herself and other men, through the hijab as well as by not giving others access to her singing, thereby making her relationship with her husband a more direct and honest one. The women feel that the internal hardships they have had to endure in order to give up music have thus enabled them to better enact humility and modesty, ideals that allow them to validate their jihad, and reform inner selves towards greater piety.

Maimuna Huq writes that in the Jama’at, there is a particular gendering whereby jihad is explained as internal to the female members, whereas the men are urged to take jihad to the wider society. However, as Huq points out, the distinction between jihad against the self and jihad against society is artificial, as encapsulated in the jihad against the self is a broader address to socio-economic issues relevant to wider society (Huq 2009: 172). My examples of jihad also point out that in the internal battles women wage, they take on societal expectations, existing cultural norms and ways of living. Thus, Arifa’s inner struggle speaks to the role of wife, daughter and sister-in-law – the roles in which women have been ascribed particular chores – the chores that women are then beholden to for recognition at home. Arifa’s pursuit of piety by way of discarding music allows her to rethink those normative expectations and the tensions they underlie, thereby enabling a certain freedom from societal ideals. Suhaila’s narrative of inner struggle similarly encapsulates a critique of the cultural expectations that frame the husband-wife relationship. Through these wider issues women’s inner struggles are also addressed, the jihad against the nafs also becomes a jihad against society.

Just as singing women in the late 1960s were constructed, by the dominant narrative on nationalism, as agents of nationalist change, women such as Arifa and Suhaila, through discarding singing, become agents of change within their families as well as the wider society. The ethnographic cases presented here have highlighted the transformative potential that adherence to an Islamic position may offer. In light of the nature of transformations delineated, I ask: can we conceive of an Islamic agenda that encapsulates more than oppression and passivity for women? If, through engagement with religion and religious rhetoric, women feel more in control of their lives, do we place such a sense, even if it accompanies a certain social conservatism and the containment of sexuality, under the rubric of modernity and national progress? Are there grounds, then, to blur the sharp divide that separates religious rhetoric from liberal ones, especially as they both vie for modernity? Or, do we leave such transformations outside the purview of the modernizing nation, and keep Islamic dictates subsumed under retrogression and therefore in an undesired competition with modernity? Whether these transformations can be given a legitimate place within the
discourse of modernity and that of a modern nation needs to be assessed through further analyses of what accompanies transformations brought on through religion, what the limits of those transformations are and who authorizes the discourse of change.

Notes

1. *Hamd* and *nath* are devotional songs about God and his messengers, notably the Prophet Muhammad. These songs are often aired on television especially during times of religious significance – Ramadan, the birthday of the prophet, etc. These songs are also sung in religious gatherings organized to commemorate auspicious or tragic events.

2. *Milads* are religious congregations organized around deaths, births or any other auspicious event, such as the construction of a new home, the launching of a new business, etc.

3. The language movement of 1952 marked the culmination of a contention felt by most Bengalis of East Pakistan, in reaction to Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s declaration that only Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan. The protest by students, intellectuals and cultural activists was attacked by the Pakistani administration, leading to the arrest and death of several Bengalis. Bengali was granted the status of official language in 1962.

4. Author’s translation.

5. *Chhayanaut* is the leading school for music in Bangladesh. It emerged at a critical time in history, when Bengali culture was being attacked by Pakistani authorities in a bid to suppress protests in East Pakistan that were geared towards the eventual struggle for the liberation of Bangladesh.

6. NGOs, especially during the BNP/Jama’at regimes, came under severe and even violent attacks from the Islamists where women attending NGO schools, receiving microcredit etc., were targeted and harassed by the local elite in collaboration with the religious leaders (Riaz 2004).

7. *Fatwas* are Islamic rulings given mostly against women for ‘offenses’ such as being involved in NGO activities and sexual transgressions.

8. Taslima Nasrine is a writer whose controversial writing questioning the tyranny of patriarchy harbored by religious parochialism led the Islamists to persecute her into exile (Alam 1998; Riaz 2009).

9. Wendy De Bano (2005) discusses musical performances in post-revolution Iran. In state-organized women-only musical festivals, women are offered a platform to express themselves through music. However, musicians often make a concerted effort not to overemphasize the sensual aspects of music. De Bano argues that outside of the context of state-sponsored and controlled events, musicians’ bodily practices are intertwined with ‘extra musical associations, including personal memories, historical phenomena and symbolic meanings’ (De Bano 2005: 445).

10. *Jihad* here is used in the sense of a struggle with oneself to overcome desires and ways that are base and arise out of arrogance. This is considered by the women I studied to be the greatest form of *jihad* as opposed to the armed *jihad* in the battlefields. For a detailed discussion see Maimuna Huq (2009).

11. Bukhari is one of the two compilations of the sayings of the prophet Muhammad, and is considered to be the most authentic (*sahih*).

12. *Tahajjud* is a prayer that is to be performed in the middle part of the night.

References


Author’s biography

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