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## **Bangladeshi Muslims in Mississippi: Impression management based on the intersectionality of religion, ethnicity, and gender**

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### **Abstract**

The existing literature on Muslims in post-9/11 America largely focuses on cities where Muslims are organized and visible in large numbers. This interview-based qualitative study instead focuses on Bangladeshi Muslims in Mississippi. Using intersectionality and impression management as analytical tools, I explore how these individuals negotiate their identities to navigate interactions with Mississippi's predominantly white Christian society. I identify three patterns of impression management: distancing religious identity, highlighting ethnicity, and confronting stereotypes. These patterns provide insight into the conceptual tools used as well as the overarching racial dynamics in America.

### **Keywords**

Muslims, Intersectionality, Impression Management, Ethnicity, Gender, Religion

## **Bangladeshi Muslims in Mississippi: Impression management based on the intersectionality of religion, ethnicity, and gender**

### **Introduction**

Every year on September 11, I want to take the day off from work. I am a hard-worker. I am polite. I try to quietly get along with everyone else. But, there is always that feeling that I don't fit in. The people I work with know I am Muslim; that I come from Bangladesh, a country most of my co-workers hadn't even heard of before. I have a thick beard. I am dark-skinned. I talk with a heavy accent. It's like the people don't know what to do with me. They are curious and filled with dread at the same time. At work, people usually don't include me in their conversations. But whenever there's news on terrorism, they come and ask me what I think. It's like being a Muslim makes me an expert on terrorists because those people out there blowing up things are also Muslims. But on September 11, it's a completely different atmosphere. People look at me like I'm a bomb about to explode. On that day, it's like *I am Al-Qaeda...* (Jamal).<sup>1</sup>

The September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks 'irrevocably changed' the status of Muslim Americans from 'invisible minorities to notorious suspects of terrorism' (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 2009: 178). Immigrant Muslims are further stigmatized not only because of their religion, but also for being foreigners (Cesari, 2004). Jamal, quoted above, lives in Mississippi, which is located in the Deep South, or the Bible-Belt of the United States, where Muslims are a religious minority. There, Bangladeshis like Jamal are also an ethnic/racial minority. Jamal's quote provides a glimpse of the complexities some Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants face in navigating social interactions in this context. Jamal has to cope not only with the stigma of being a Muslim and an immigrant, but also his ethnicity, which is highlighted in his 'thick-beard,' 'dark complexion,' and 'thick accent'. In addition, his gender serves as a further marker of 'threat' in the eyes of co-workers, as being a man puts him closer to the stereotype of the Arab Muslim terrorist (Shaheen, 2003). *How*, then, do Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants, a stigmatized religious and ethnic minority group in Mississippi, manage the multiple dimensions of their identities as they interact with a predominantly white Christian society in the post-9/11 social climate? Little is known on this topic, as both the regional context and the population in question have been largely overlooked in the existing literature on Muslims in the United States.

This article explores how Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants manage the multiple dimensions of their identities as they interact with a predominantly white Christian society based on interviews of Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants living in Mississippi. This study applies the concepts of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1990) and impression management (Goffman, 1959) as analytical tools. Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants navigate race/ethnicity, religion, and gender in their everyday lives through three strategies—distancing religious identity, highlighting ethnicity, and confronting stereotypes. This article then alludes to how the case of Bangladeshis in Mississippi sheds light on the larger racial dynamics in the United States. The overarching system of American racial and ethno-religious domination forces Bangladeshi Muslims to navigate social interactions in ways that contribute to the perpetuation of the racial hierarchy in the United States.

Conceptually, these empirical findings show how intersectionality can analytically capture the transnational aspects of privilege and oppression (Purkayastha, 2012). When the Bangladeshi immigrants in this study distance religion and highlight ethnicity, they access ethnic resources (cultural knowledge and material goods), which transcend the boundaries of the homeland and the hostland. As immigrants, they are able to access resources in a location (their homeland) *beyond* the country in which they live to balance their lack of privilege in the hostland context. On the other hand, in terms of impression management, this article examines the religious dimension of the respondents' 'working' or 'public' identities (Carbado and Gulati, 2013; Lacy, 2007). The following sections provide background to contextualize the study.

### **Muslims in post-9/11 America**

In the aftermath of 9/11, Muslim Americans, regardless of their diverse ethnic backgrounds, have been forced into one, ostensibly homogenous Muslim category and are seen as *collectively*

culpable for the terrorist attacks (Beydoun, 2013; Cainkar, 2009). Many Muslim men across ethnicities were detained immediately after 9/11 for questioning simply based on their religious identity (ACLU, 2004). The government launched programs for heightened surveillance targeting Muslim immigrants. NSEERS, for example, enforced foreign nationals from twenty-six Muslim majority countries (including Bangladesh) to be registered, fingerprinted and photographed upon US entry followed by annual reports to the INS (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 2009; Maira, 2008). From 2001 to 2014, the NYPD had established a secret surveillance program on American Muslims in New York monitoring and analyzing their everyday life (MACLC, CLEAR and AALDEF, 2013).

Indeed, studies have suggested that the religion of Islam itself has been racialized and not only the individuals who subscribe to it (Cainkar, 2009; Maira, 2008). The Islamic faith is seen as inherently flawed and inclined towards violence. ‘*Muslim-looking*’ individuals—turbaned, veiled, bearded, and brown, are racially profiled and are targets of suspicion and surveillance as potential threats to national security (Carbado and Gulati, 2013; Purkayastha, 2012; Dhingra, 2007). Although the West has viewed Muslims with suspicion long before the terrorist attacks of 9/11 based on Orientalist notions of Islam and the Middle East (Said, 1979),<sup>2</sup> fear, hostility, and suspicion towards Muslims as potential terrorists have intensified since then (Akram, 2002).

Racial profiling based on the Muslim terrorist stereotype has also spilled across ethnic and religious boundaries. South Asians, a category that includes immigrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, and Bhutan are lumped together as ‘brown’ folk in America despite the ethnic and religious diversities within the group. Historically associated with the model minority stereotype, South Asians have also been paradoxically linked to the terrorist stereotype since 9/11. For example, Sikh men who also wear turbans and beards have been

victims of the 9/11 backlash against Islam in America because of being misidentified as Muslim (Maira, 2009; Falcone, 2006; Kurien, 2003). Maira analyzed this post-9/11 climate as ‘a shift in United States race politics’ as ‘the racialized fault lines were no longer just between white Americans and racial minorities, or even the binary of black and white Americans, but between those categorized as Muslim or non-Muslim, American or foreign, or citizen or noncitizen’ (2008: 18).

In this context, South Asians are collectively perceived as enemies based on racial stereotyping during times of heightened national threat. To avoid being thus stereotyped, South Asian immigrants are forced to actively perform an ‘American’ identity. This is observable at the micro-level in personal interactions and presentation and at the meso-level in organizational framing. At the micro-level, individuals display American flags in their store windows and patriotic bumper stickers in their cars, manage their clothing (including not wearing turbans), and shave their facial hair (Dhingra, 2007: 100). At the meso-level, many South Asian Hindu organizations overemphasize their Hindu identity and have created anti-Islam platforms to distance themselves from Muslims (Kurien, 2003). Maira (2008) notes, however, that while the fear and anxiety about racial profiling has relatively lessened over time for some South Asian immigrants (such as Hindus, Christians, and to some extent even Sikhs) they persist for Muslims who continue to be targets of suspicion, surveillance, and discrimination. The attacks, subsequent government initiatives, and the War on Terror have thus thrust religious identity to the center of Muslims’ sense of self in America (Rahman, 2010; Ewing and Hoyler, 2008; Mohammed-Arif, 2002).

In these racialized political and social contexts, researchers from diverse fields have focused on the impact of 9/11 on Muslim communities and their responses against the backlash

(Bryan, 2005; Cainkar and Maira, 2005; Sirin and Fine, 2007; Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 2009). While some researchers have studied Muslim Americans in general (Leonard, 2002), some others have focused on ethnic Muslim communities, such as Arabs (Cainkar and Maira, 2005) and South Asians (Jamil and Rousseau, 2012; Mohammed-Arif, 2002; Kibria, 2011), to analyze how their heightened religious awareness have shaped their everyday lives. Although this diverse scholarship provides rich insight into Muslims' position in the American society, most studies have been conducted in cosmopolitan cities (e.g., New York, Boston, Los Angeles) where Muslims are visible in large numbers, have organized around ethnic enclaves as well as mobilized under organizational banners.

However, as Maira (2008) noted in her study on notions of citizenship among South Asian Muslim youths in New England that the impact of the War on Terror was also felt in places where Muslims are not as visible and organized in the public sphere as in places like New York and New Jersey.<sup>3</sup> Maira's fieldsite, the city of Wellford in New England is politically liberal with a diverse immigrant population. Her sample population came from low-income families and lived in racially diverse neighborhoods. Mississippi provides a contrasting and yet unexplored context because of its political, religious, and racial background, which may provide insight into other new immigrant destinations in the United States.

### **The context of Mississippi**

Mississippi is the most religious (Protestant Christian) state in the country and is publicly labeled as one of the US Bible Belt states (Newport, 2012). Almost 92% of the population is Christian (Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, 2013) with 76.9% Protestants and 7.5% Catholics (Gallup, 2013). In contrast, less than one percent of the population is Muslim including African American Muslims (Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, 2013). An online

search for religious centers in Mississippi produced only sixteen mosques in contrast to over 1100 churches. In 2011, Mississippi introduced House Bill 301 to ban the use of international law, specifically sharia law, in the courts within the state. Although HB 301 died in the committee, its introduction and the subsequent debates reflect the state's view of Islam and Muslims as encroaching foreigners and threats to American-ness.

In terms of race/ethnicity, the overall population of the state is 59.9% white and 37.4% black (US Census Bureau, 2014). Asians, including Bangladeshis, comprise only 0.9% of the state's population (US Census Bureau, 2014). Race and racial inequality as dominant in Southern politics is certainly nothing new (Valentino and Sears, 2005). In Mississippi, confederate battle signs, most notably the state flag, as public symbols reflect the underlying racial tensions that persist today. The state is politically conservative and Republican (Gallup, 2013). The racial composition of the Republican Party is largely white in contrast to the much smaller, opposing Southern Democratic party, which is dominated by African Americans (Black and Black, 2002).

Unlike places like New York and Los Angeles, Mississippi does not have ethnic enclaves. Enclaves can provide insulation to foreigners from interacting with people outside their communities (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). Muslim immigrants within enclaves may not have to regularly interact with others beyond their community and thus maybe less exposed to anti-immigrant and Islamophobic attitudes than those who live in places without enclaves. This does not indicate that there is more or less racism and Islamophobia in some places than others. Instead, this analysis emphasizes how different social contextual factors (e.g. exposure to dominant society) allow for different kinds of expressions based on intersecting relations of power.

The strength of large numbers of the Muslim population in such cities as New York and Los Angeles allows the Muslim community leaders to lobby politicians in exchange for Muslim votes (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 2009). Muslim community leaders in such cities can also reach out to other organizations across religious and ethnic lines to mobilize for causes, as they did against the 9/11 backlash. However, in places like the cities in Mississippi Muslims may not have the leverage to make claims using political channels with a small Muslim population and without an organized community. In 2014, for example, bullets, apparently from a rifle, were shot at an Islamic center in Hattiesburg, Mississippi (Barnea, Press, and Varnado, 2014). Although the center was empty and no one was wounded, the attack is believed by the center's members to be a targeted attack. However, the police, community members and leaders at the local and state levels have been largely silent and unresponsive. Save for very brief coverage on the local news, the media has remained silent as well. Without political leverage, there has been little the members could do to push for an investigation and ensure their security.

At the time of writing this paper (2014), I could not find any research on Muslims in the Deep South of the United States. This narrow focus on location overlooks the diversity of social contexts and Muslim immigrant experiences within America. Researchers studying Muslim populations in America need to expand their focus to include cities that are sparsely populated by Muslims and are small in number to analyze the ways in which they navigate a disadvantageous position in the society. This study thus contributes to the literature by looking at how Muslims, a religious and racial minority, navigate through their day-to-day interactions in a majority white Christian society in a largely hostile socio-political context.

### **Bangladeshi Muslims in Mississippi**

The context of Mississippi is starkly different from the social position, which the Bangladeshi Muslim respondents occupied back in Bangladesh. An ethnic and religious *minority* in Mississippi, they simultaneously belong to the dominant *majority* in Bangladesh. Almost 90% of the population in Bangladesh is Muslim. The population within the country is also ethnically homogenous with 98% Bengalis, an ethno-linguistic group (CIA, 2014). In American society however, Bangladesh is a largely unknown country. When Bangladesh does appear in the media, it is because of its floods, poverty, and political instability. As such, while the Bangladeshi identity is obscure and marginalized in the American society, it is also stigmatizing because of Bangladesh's global national image as a developing country (Kibria, 2011). Based on the context of Mississippi, how do Bangladeshi Muslims negotiate being Muslim as well as coming from a little-known developing country in their day-to-day social interactions?

Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants have been largely overlooked in the literature on Muslims in the United States. They are usually lumped together as part of panethnic categories such as, Asian, South Asian, and Muslim American. The few studies on Bangladeshi Muslim immigrant communities were conducted in cities such as New York, Detroit, and Boston (Kibria, 2011; Rahman, 2010). Kibria (2011) studied how religion and national identity shape identity formation of Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants in the United States. Rahman (2010) focused particularly how 9/11 shaped Bangladeshi Muslims' perception of identity and citizenship. Bangladeshi Muslims adopt 'safe behavior' in public for fear of being associated with terrorism (Rahman, 2010: 58). This study identifies *patterns* of 'safe' public behavior as well as variations in these patterns based on social context and individual attributes like gender. Gender is a crucial factor in analyzing patterns of behavior because gender norms shape individuals' presentation of selves (Guadagno and Cialdini, 2007).

## **Intersectionality and impression management**

I use the notion of impression management (Goffman, 1959; Goffman, 1963) and the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1990) as analytical tools to pinpoint the mechanisms through which Bangladeshi Muslims in Mississippi negotiate their social position in the context of Mississippi and how ethnicity, religion, and gender simultaneously shape their everyday social interactions.

### *Impression Management*

According to Erving Goffman (1963), we attach meanings to the attributes of individuals based on the social setting. We then stereotype those individuals as members of groups having similar perceived attributes. When individuals deviate from our imposed stereotype in a less desirable way, those attributes become discrediting features or stigmas. Stigmatized individuals navigate social interactions by managing their discreditable or already discredited identities. Impression management is the managing of these identities (Goffman, 1959).

The Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants in this study face ‘tribal stigma,’ which is based on an individual’s membership to a devalued racial, national, or religious group (Goffman, 1963: 4). Tribal or collective stigma is the enduring stigma attached to a group rather than to an individual. Unlike other kinds of stigma, lineage is a necessary element in tribal stigma. Being born African American, for example, exposes one to tribal stigma regardless of one’s self-identity as an individual. Although tribal stigma cannot be completely eradicated, it can, however, be avoided, hidden, denied, or modified through impression management (Gardner and Gronfein, 2014). The Bangladeshi Muslims in this study perceive the need to perform impression management because they feel stigmatized because of their religious and ethnic identities—group memberships they were born with.

Race scholars have applied and developed the notion of impression management to analyze how African Americans and other people of color develop ‘working’ or ‘public’ identities to negotiate their racial and class positions in the racialized, color-blind American society (Carbado and Gulati, 2013; Lacy, 2007). Carbado and Gulati (2013: 15) explain that working identities are ‘the perceived choices people make’ about presenting their racial, gender, and sexual identities as well as the ‘perceived’ identities themselves that emerge from making those strategic decisions. Lacy (2007), examines impression management or ‘public identities’ based on race and class. She argues that public identities are necessities even for the black *middle* class because African Americans are generally associated with the urban underclass and not perceived as members of the American middle class. While impression management based on race, class, gender, and sexuality has been studied, the religious dimension of working or public identities has been overlooked. This study focuses on religion and how it intersects with ethnicity and gender in Bangladeshi Muslims’ presentation of selves in public places.

### *Intersectionality*

While Goffman’s notion provides the micro-level tools to analyze Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants’ day-to-day interactions, the theory of intersectionality bridges the participants’ experiences to macro-level structural inequalities. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) first coined the term intersectionality when talking about the multidimensionality of African American women’s subordination. According to Crenshaw, ‘the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism’ (1989: 140). The subjugation of black women cannot be accurately measured without considering how both race and gender interact to *simultaneously* shape the multiple dimensions of black women’s experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). Patricia Hill Collins (1990) used Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality as a component to discuss ‘black feminist thought’—the

body of knowledge that emerged from African American women's experiences of subjugation at the intersection of multiple relations of power, specifically race, gender, and class.

Collins (1990: 225) theorized these power relations as bound by an interlocking system of oppression or the 'matrix of domination'. This non-additive approach towards studying social inequalities is also referred to as intersectionality (Choo and Ferree, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Individuals within this matrix are simultaneously members of several dominant *and* subordinate groups thus having varying balances of both oppression and privilege. Nonetheless, there are observable *patterns* of oppressed experiences based on overlapping cultural and structural contexts. In terms of race and gender, experiences of African American *women* are different from African American *men* based on the structural inequalities of gender despite being categorized as of the same race. Again, despite sharing the same *gender*, the experiences of African American women are profoundly different from those of white women because of structural *racial* inequalities.

Collins (2010) later included the relations of power based on ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, and nation to the concept of intersectionality. All these strands of power relations intersect to simultaneously shape individuals' social experiences. However, Purkayastha (2012) points out that Collins's original and later developments of intersectionality still do not address the power relations based on religion. Purkayastha (2012) calls for intersectional research that includes religion-based marginalization. Taking an intersectional approach, this study explores how gender and race intersect with religion-based relations of power among Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants in post-9/11 America.

Purkayastha also calls for research expanding the concept of intersectionality onto transnational social spaces, which are composed of 'tangible geographical spaces' and connections across multiple nation-states and virtual spaces (2012: 56). Individuals with access

to transnational social spaces (such as, immigrants who build lives in more than one country) can balance their ‘lack of privilege’ in one country by ‘actively seeking out privilege and power located in another place and/or virtual spaces’ (Purkayastha, 2012: 60). From this perspective, the Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants in this study have access to a transnational social space that encompasses and connects both their homeland and hostland. As shown later, they locate ethnic resources from their homeland to better their living conditions in the hostland society.

### **Methodology**

In 2012, I began an exploratory study on how Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants in Mississippi navigated the ethnic and religious hostland context, which is in stark contrast to their homeland context. The findings presented in this article come from in-depth interviews of twelve Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants (seven women and five men) living in three mid-size to large cities in Mississippi. Most of the interview sessions lasted for an hour or longer, the shortest being forty minutes.<sup>4</sup> All of my interviewees were from lower-middle to middle class backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> The respondents in this study came to America through family or student visas. Except for two women, all of the interviewees were employed. Although some of the interviewees entered the United States through other cities, at the time of the interviews the respondents were all settled in Mississippi.

The absence of a Muslim neighborhood or a Bangladeshi enclave in Mississippi made locating the immigrant Muslim population difficult. Given this challenge, I used snowball sampling beginning with a Bangladeshi Muslim immigrant acquaintance (Browne, 2005). My positionality as a Bangladeshi Muslim woman gave me an insider status, which helped me find more respondents. Seven of the interviews presented in this paper were done over the telephone according to the respondents’ preferences.<sup>6</sup> I used semi-structured interviews (Wengraf, 2001)

geared towards generating nuanced narratives about personal circumstances, interactional dynamics, and interpersonal situations. The interviews were conducted and recorded in Bengali (the language the respondents spoke at home) which were then translated and transcribed in English.<sup>7</sup> I open-coded the data to identify themes, followed by line-by-line or focused coding for details (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995).

My positionality also shaped the flow of the interviews. I called the respondents at their residence and introduced myself in Bengali. Although I did not initially know most of the respondents, I observed that the female interviewees talked to me informally from the beginning, addressing me as *tumi* [you], (suggests informality and familiarity). In contrast, all male participants in the telephone interviews spoke formally at first, addressing me as *apni* (suggests formality and politeness). However, they sounded more relaxed and informal after I introduced myself as a student. Nonetheless, I had to initially coax all the interviewees to share their experiences with me. To make the female respondents comfortable and create a safe space over the phone, I shared my experiences of confronting racism as a Bangladeshi Muslim immigrant in the United States. When talking to the men, I shared experiences of my male family members. I found this probing technique effective in presenting myself as an insider who is aware of the sensitivities involved in sharing personal experiences with strangers over the phone. Although by doing so there was a danger of channeling the interviewees to speak about specific topics, had I refrained from sharing my own experiences, I would most likely have not had the access to the respondents' narratives. I was also able to identify and penetrate the respondents' pregnant silences during the interviews by adopting a reflexive approach (Davies, 1999).<sup>8</sup>

A limitation of these telephone interviews is that I could not observe the nuances of my interviewees' facial and physical expressions. Nonetheless, I found that the interviewees felt

comfortable talking over the phone and indulged me with valuable personal anecdotes. Neither the respondent nor I had to manage our physical presentations to each other in these interviews. As such, they did not feel a need to tailor their responses to meet my biases as indicated by clothing, phenotype, facial expressions, mannerisms etc.

### **Patterns of impression management of Bangladeshi Muslims in Mississippi**

The data derived from the interviews suggest that Bangladeshi Muslims in Mississippi employ three tools for impression management based on the intersection of their gender, ethnicity, and religion. These strategies are: 1) distancing oneself from Islam 2) making ethnic identity visible while making religion invisible and 3) confronting stereotypes.

#### *Distancing from Islam*

Most interviewees usually distanced themselves from Islam, particularly *political* Islam, to navigate their daily social interactions.<sup>9</sup> With the exception of two women who choose to wear hijab in public, all other interviewees described how they attempt to avoid interactions, which can reveal their religious identity to the public.<sup>10</sup> The stories of Rina and Tarek best capture how the strategy of distancing Islam is shaped by the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and religion.

Rina, a middle-aged woman who has been living in Mississippi and working at the same grey-collar job for the past five years, consciously decided not to speak of her religion to her colleagues. They knew Rina was a Bangladeshi immigrant. They often asked her questions about ‘Bangladeshi culture’ that Rina did not dread answering. Regarding her religion, however, Rina thinks that, ‘Muslims and Islam have a bad face here. I don’t want them to see me like that—like Laden. What he did was not Islam. But, he was a Muslim and people know *I* am a Muslim. At least, I don’t want them to identify me as a Muslim whenever they talk to me.’ When

asked how she avoids such unwanted attention, Rina mentioned that she does not wear a hijab—her usual attire being a shirt and slacks. While middle-class Muslim women not wearing hijab may be usual in Bangladesh, once *within* the United States a simple matter of whether or not to wear hijab becomes a subject of strategizing. In America, the simple head covering becomes an indicator of Muslim identity, which is associated with negative stereotypes. For Rina, to wear a hijab in public is thus not just to wear a head covering, but also to take on the negative meanings attached to it.

Rina does not pray at work, although she does at home. During Ramadan if her co-workers ask her about lunch, Rina replies that she is skipping a meal. However in an office potluck party towards the end of her first year of work, a co-worker served her pork, which Rina refused because of Islamic dietary restrictions. In order to avoid offending the coworker, she had to explain her refusal by revealing her Muslim identity. Rina recalled the surprised expression of her co-worker who did not pursue the topic further that day. However, word quickly spread and since then Rina often had to answer questions like, “What do Muslims do when...?” According to Rina, most of those questions are out of curiosity but she still never lets her guard down. She told her co-workers that she does not follow politics or the news so that they do not engage her in any ‘serious’ conversation.

Nonetheless, Rina recalls an incident when her religious identity came into sharp focus. The day after Osama bin Laden was killed, a coworker asked her opinion on the matter. Rina replied that she was ‘very happy that he is gone. What he did was not Islam. He was an extremist, unlike most Muslims.’ She further explained to her coworker that she is ‘a moderate Muslim who believes that Islam is a religion of peace.’

Rina navigates interactions at her workplace by creating a distance between herself and Islam in the following ways: she strategically avoids any association with the Muslim woman stereotype through her clothes; she does not partake in any religious practice publicly like praying or fasting; she avoids political conversation, but when put on the spot she differentiates between *her* religious point of view and political Islam.

Tarek, on the other hand, has to employ different tools for distancing Islam largely because of his gender. Tarek, like Jamal at the beginning of the paper, has a dark complexion and a full beard that associate his appearance to the stereotypical image of a Muslim man—a perceived security threat. Unlike Rina, despite wearing ‘normal American clothes’ like shirts and trousers, Tarek’s physical appearance marks him as the Other before any actual interaction takes place. At one point when the interview turned towards obstacles because of the Muslim terrorist stereotype, Tarek shared a revealing anecdote on how his *beard* often poses obstacles in public. He said,

In general, everyone here respects each other’s beliefs. But occasionally, I face obstacles because of my beard. Occasionally, I have had people call me Osama bin Laden, or asking me if I know where he is hiding. They [the public] don’t react positively to my beard—they see me as a threat. For example, I went to the airport to pick up a group of immigrant friends who all had beards. A group of people called us from a distance and made fun of our beards. They made Bin Laden jokes at us.

When I asked Tarek how he responded to these jokes, Tarek replied,

I looked at how my friends were reacting. They laughed back trying to make the situation light. So, I did the same. If I were alone, I probably would not have shown *any* reaction. I would have just walked away. I am sure those people were just doing it for fun. I’m sure they didn’t mean any harm. But, it was after all in a public place and in front of my friends. So, I felt humiliated and sad. [But] I did not want to escalate the situation.

These two examples show the intersecting structural inequalities of gender, ethnicity, and religion. The beard and the veil are gendered and stigmatized symbols that determine whether or not individuals can distance themselves from the stigma of being associated with Islam. While

Rina's avoidance of wearing a veil allows her to negotiate her religious identity to some extent in her own terms in public, Tarek's beard highlights his identity as a Muslim *man*. Tarek's gender, further exacerbated by his ethnic features, renders his image close to the stereotypical Muslim terrorist. Based on the common social beliefs in gender roles where women are believed to be weaker than men, Rina poses a lesser threat because of her gender and her presentation of racialized gender roles than Tarek who is a brown bearded man. Tarek, in the example, was *unable* to distance himself from Islam because of how his gender, ethnicity, and religion intersected to highlight certain features in that social context. Instead, he had to manage avoiding further attention. His way of distancing himself from *political* Islam was to laugh at the Islamophobic jokes regarding him to prevent the situation from further escalating.

The interviewees do not, however, distance Islam in their private lives. For example, all of the participants reported praying at home daily, fasting during Ramadan when possible, and celebrating Eid with the family. The women who had young children were especially careful to practice Islam at home to socialize their children to their ethnic religion. This shows that to avoid being associated with political Islam in public, the *social* aspect of Islam—the collective practice and celebration of religious beliefs—gets relegated largely to the privacy of the home.

*Making 'Bangladeshi' visible and 'Muslim' invisible*

Another mode of impression management in daily life for the participants is to traverse a fine line between visibility and invisibility (both of which can be oppressive) of different identities in public interactions. While they strategically distance their religious *Muslim* identities, they highlight their ethnic *Bangladeshi* identities. Bangladeshi Muslims in Mississippi are immigrants of color in a predominantly white state where African Americans are the prominent people of color. 'Brown people' like Bangladeshis, as noted by several of the interviewees, fall along the

historically rooted and persistent black-white divide. Jamal, a grey-collar worker who is the only person from a foreign ethnic background in his shift explained the dilemma he faces at work everyday as he tries and fails to fit in with either of the two race groups. He said,

*Shada rao nei na. Kalo rao nei na* [The whites don't accept me. The blacks don't accept me.]<sup>11</sup> They don't know what to do with me. The whites hate me. I can tell by the way they talk to me—as if I am nothing, a lowly thing they have to tolerate for work. So I am obviously rejected [by white co-workers]. But with blacks, it's the same. I am not white, but I am not black. I am an outsider. I don't share their culture. I don't understand many of their jokes that seem to be only for other black co-workers.

Rashid and Fahim have the same dilemma of fitting in but do not seem to feel as rejected as Jamal. Both of them have graduate degrees from American universities and are white-collar workers. They are middle-aged and have immigrated to America in adulthood. They both speak English fluently with an accent. Neither of them is bearded but both have dark complexion. Both Rashid and Fahim actively engage in volunteering information about Bangladesh. They highlight their ethnic identity by taking Bangladeshi food for co-workers. On diversity day at their workplaces, they wear or carry with them traditional Bangladeshi clothes and make a presentation on their home country. These presentations are very important impression management tools for Fahim and Rashid. Bangladeshi immigrants carry the burden of their country's negative global image as a result of coming from a poor developing country infamous for its floods and political turmoil (Kibria, 2011). For example, Rina and Jamal's co-workers ask them about Bangladesh's floods and poverty. Diversity day provides an institutional opportunity for Bangladeshi individuals like Fahim and Rashid to highlight the positive aspects of their country as a response to the public's poor assumption about Bangladesh. In these diversity day presentations, Fahim and Rashid highlight their rich culture, scenic beauty, and national achievements both at home and abroad—tools used to construct a favorable impression. I noted,

however, that they do not present the national achievements of *Muslims* but only *Bangladeshis* around the world on these occasions.

While diversity day presentations provide a formal way of highlighting ethnic identity, taking traditional food and presents for co-workers, wearing traditional clothes and trinkets are some informal ways. Curious co-workers sometimes approach Jamal asking to sample Bangladeshi cuisine. Although reluctant to highlight his Otherness, Jamal views this as an opportunity to build working relationships at the workplace. When he took homemade Bangladeshi food on these occasions in the past, he was careful to garnish and pack the food very neatly so that the food looked appealing to everyone. He even placed cards with the ingredients written on each item so that his co-workers were not anxious about what the foods were made of. Rina, too, takes Bangladeshi food to potluck parties at her work. She even gave recipes to some of her co-workers who liked her food items. In the past whenever she returned from trips to Bangladesh, she brought traditional Bangladeshi presents (clothes, handicrafts) for most of the people she works with.

Highlighting the Bangladeshi identity while making invisible the religious one through formal and informal ways thus provides the Bangladeshi Muslim respondents a way of fitting in with their co-workers. As in the case of Rashid and Fahim, the *Bangladeshi* identity opens up a reservoir of resources that expands over and beyond the country in which they live. These Bangladeshi immigrants bring to America from their homeland ethnic resources in the form of cultural knowledge, food, recipes, traditional clothes, and handicrafts such as, bangles, earrings, wallets etc. The examples of Fahim, Rashid, Rina, and Jamal suggest that they carefully and strategically use these resources to build social ties with their co-workers. Unlike the Muslim identity, their Bangladeshi identity adds value to their presence as a *welcome* addition to the

cultural diversity at their workplaces. The intersection of their Muslim identity with their Bangladeshi one allows these individuals access to a transnational social space where they locate homeland resources to compensate for the religious stigma in the US context.

### *Confronting stereotypes*

Although most of the interviewees aimed to avoid direct confrontation, they nonetheless confronted religious and ethnic stereotypes when directly approached depending on whether or not they judged the situation might escalate. For example, when the coworker asked Rina about her feelings towards Osama bin Laden's death, she chose to correct her coworker's impression of her—although a Muslim, she is not an extremist like Laden but a moderate like most Muslims are. Co-workers who know a little about Bangladesh from the media sometimes ask Jamal and Rashid about where they grew up and how they came to America. Both Jamal and Rashid think that behind these questions are underlying assumptions that all Bangladeshis are poverty-stricken and live in slums as shown on television. They 'correct' their co-workers by saying that they grew up middle class in high-rise apartments in the city. Jamal in fact came to America through family visa and Rashid came as a graduate student with a scholarship.

However, whether or not direct confrontation is a viable option for impression management depends greatly on the social situation. Rina, Jamal and Rashid's interactions took place in office settings where the exchanges were controlled to some extent and were less likely to escalate. In contrast, Tarek's interactions took place in a public place (the airport) and with complete strangers and thus could have escalated quickly. As a result, Tarek chose not to confront the stereotype of the terrorist Muslim man for fear of bringing more attention or harm to himself.

Some interviewees think that providing facts about Islam is the most effective way of confronting stereotypes. As such, they collect facts about Islam as a precautionary measure to use when confronted with stereotypes. For example, Yasmin is a pink-collar worker and a mother to two young children. She said that she learned more about her religion here in America than in Bangladesh. Yasmin wants to be able to defend her identity as a Muslim woman with information. She thinks that providing facts that people can verify is much more effective in dispelling stereotypes in the long run than ignoring them.

Like Yasmin, Khaled also views knowledge on Islam as a toolkit to confront stereotypes in day-to-day interactions. He likes to read blogs and articles on Islam and the West in his spare time. He engages in conversations about religious issues with other Muslim men from Middle Eastern countries after prayers at the mosque. He finds that there are a lot of ‘misconceptions particularly in the West about Islam and the faith and its rituals.’ In Khaled’s words, ‘People will always...media will always feed you that Jihad is to go and kill all the non-believers. Islam is peace. When Americans ask me about Jihad, I tell them that Jihad is within your own self—to fight lust and greed and overcome all your negative emotions.’ Sometimes when American Christians ask him about his religion based on what they heard on the news, Khaled refers them to books and websites so they know the facts from both sides.

In this section, I have described three patterns of impression management techniques that Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants employ as they navigate through interactions with the predominantly white Christian society in Mississippi. The interviewees use these tools of impression management interchangeably depending on the situation. Intersecting inequalities of religion, ethnicity, and gender compel them to maintain a fine balance of distancing religion, highlighting ethnicity, and confronting stereotypes.

## **The racial context of the United States**

These empirical patterns provide insight into the larger racial power structure in America. The absence of direct confrontation and defiance of the ethnic and religious stereotypes in the respondents' day-to-day interactions reveals an imbalance of power between the small Bangladeshi Muslim population and the dominant white Christian majority in Mississippi. One of James C. Scott's (1985) findings from his ethnography on everyday forms of peasant resistance is that the relatively weak and powerless often cannot afford to engage in an all out direct defiance of the dominant group because the high cost of doing so jeopardizes their daily existence. This lens help explain why the interviewees did not engage in acts of mobilized resistance. As a small population and a stigmatized Other without an organized collective voice, Bangladeshi Muslims comprise a relatively powerless group in the predominantly white, Christian Mississippi. They have not been able to build coalitions with other minority groups to gain political leverage. As such, the burden of direct defiance and the risk of a backlash fall on the shoulders of individuals. Instead of engaging in direct defiance, most of the Bangladeshi Muslims in this study are invested in ways to avoid being stigmatized as Muslims. The context of Mississippi thus shapes the respondents' expressions of resistance to be more passive than direct defiance.

The respondents in this study have largely engaged in a narrative that muted their religious affiliation and highlighted hard work, positive national heritage, and success stories to overcome the stigma of being associated with Islam. In other words, they wanted to project themselves as the kind of immigrants America values and wants. However, by engaging in such a narrative, these individuals unconsciously ensnare themselves within the model minority stereotype—a racial project (Omi and Winant, 1994), which has been imposed on South Asians

as part of anti-black politics in the United States (Prashad, 2000). Based on values of hard work and individual responsibility as opposed to structural determinants, while the model minority stereotype creates advancement opportunities, it nonetheless portrays South Asians as racialized Others. For example, in the aftermath of 9/11, South Asians were not seen as the role models of success but were racially profiled as the Other (Maira, 2009).

At the same time, the model minority stereotype is a ‘pillar of inferential racism’ against African Americans that strengthens white supremacy (Prashad, 2000: 170). Even when African Americans are not present in the frame, the notion of model minority stands in relation to the poor and lazy black stereotype (Prashad, 2000). To elevate South Asians as hardworking and successful infers that African Americans are unsuccessful because of their own character. Thus, the examples of Jamal, Rashid, and Fahim speak of a larger racial dynamic in America. The overarching hierarchical racial structure forces these Bangladeshi Muslims to negotiate religious power relations in ways that position them against African Americans and unintentionally reinforce anti-blackness. In terms of intersectionality, they exemplify the complex ways in which interlocking systems of oppression are compounded on different groups because of structures of inequality.

## **Conclusion**

The focus of this study has been to explore how Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants in Mississippi, a religious and ethnic minority, navigate their day-to-day interactions with the predominantly white, Christian society. This study identified specific patterns of impression management that Bangladeshi Muslims employ to avoid stigma as a result of being Muslim. The three patterns are: 1) distancing oneself from Islam in public 2) highlighting ethnicity and 3) confronting stereotypes. *How* they use these techniques of impression management is shaped by the

individuals' intersecting identities of religion, ethnicity, and gender. Whether or not they are able to use these techniques and are successful in managing impressions depend on the social situation. The macro and micro level analysis used in this study reveal how structural inequalities pertaining to religion, gender, and ethnicity compel Bangladeshi Muslims to adopt these strategies. Conceptually, this article highlights how intersectionality as an analytical tool can reveal how religious, ethnic, and gendered relations of power, as well as the *transnational* dimensions of privilege and oppression shape the ways in which the Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants negotiate their identities and social position. This article also shows how religious working or public identities are maintained using impression management as a micro-level analytical tool.

However, this article is based on a preliminary study using a small sample of interviewees. A bigger dataset on Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants is needed to generalize the findings across the region and group. In addition to recruiting more interviewees, future research could broaden the scope to include interactions of Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants with other racial, ethnic, and religious groups, specifically African Americans who comprise the second-largest race category in Mississippi. While the findings presented in this article are based on interviews, participant observation could add insight into the Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants' 'hidden' ways of resisting domination that take place 'beyond direct observation by powerholders' (Scott, 1990: 4) as well as *where* such resistance occurs for this group. Future studies could also explore the interactions and relationships between Bangladeshi Muslims and other Muslim ethnic groups (such as, African American, Middle-Eastern and South Asian Muslims) in Mississippi. By including the context of Mississippi into the framework for research

on Muslims in America, this article hopes to be the first step towards asking more specific and comparative research questions about Muslim immigrants in a wide range of American contexts.

### Notes

1. All names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.
2. Orientalism is a political representation of the East supported by institutions, language, colonialist ideology, and imagery constructed by and in relation to the West so that ‘the Oriental’ is generalized as the Other—alien, inferior, exotic, and threatening to the West.
3. Both hyper-visibility and invisibility can be oppressive. While the former exposes the group to stigma, the latter excludes voices from mainstream representation. However, visibility in organized contexts can be managed collectively and can provide avenues for publicity and gaining political leverage as opposed to isolated individuals bearing the risks on their own. Muslim American organizations, for example, have been able to use their visibility to publicize their views and build inter-religious coalitions at both local and national levels.
4. Other terms, such as ‘integrative’ (Glenn, 1999), are also used to refer to this approach. Although the term intersectionality has been coined by Crenshaw in the late eighties and then reintroduced by Collins in the nineties, this approach towards analyzing identity as being formed by the interaction of race, gender, class, and sexuality had pre-existed in black feminist scholarship for decades (Nash, 2008; Davis, 2008).
5. Their class position, residence, immigration status, and educational attainment suggest that they have structurally assimilated to the US society. The interview data on their everyday lived experiences, however, suggests feelings of marginalization and exclusion based on race and religion.

6. Various qualitative researchers have suggested that telephone interviews, if not equally effective, are the next best alternative to face-to-face interview (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Weiss, 1994).
7. Individuals were interviewed once with no follow-ups. However, I met with some interviewees outside the interview sessions at public gatherings to establish familiarity, not for interviewing purposes.
8. Reflexivity is a feminist approach of conducting qualitative research where the researcher uses her own experiences and social location to gain insight into how macro-level social processes may be shaping the participants' experiences and worldview. This approach contrasts with an ostensibly objective approach where the researcher completely detaches herself from the subjects in her study and takes the strict role of an observer.
9. Political Islam has to do with Islamist movements that view Islam as a political ideology (Roy, 1994).
10. The two women who chose to wear hijab in public were actively involved with the Muslim community. They were both unemployed and lived close to the mosque. One of them said, 'I don't mix with people outside the Muslim community because outside there is free mixing—men and women sit and eat together. I don't like that. In the [Islamic] community I always sit with women. There are all sorts of foreign [not guaranteed halal] food and restaurants.' They ordered the halal food online and sometimes even travelled to neighboring states to buy halal groceries. Their interactions outside their Muslim community were very limited. As such, I did not include their interviews in the article.
11. I included the Bengali sentence from the interview because the English translation does not accurately capture the raw sentiments.

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