An Exploration of Bengali Identity with Material and Visual Artifacts through Painting

Farah Billah
University of New Orleans, fbillah@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/3009

This Thesis-Restricted is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis-Restricted in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis-Restricted has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.
An Exploration of Bengali Identity
with Material and Visual Artifacts through Painting

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Art

by

Farah Billah
B.A. University of California Irvine, 2016
May, 2022
Table of Contents

List of Figures ........................................................................................................... iii
Introduction .............................................................................................................. 1
Personal References ............................................................................................... 2
Drawings, Energy, Surrealism, and the Segue into Painting .................................. 2
Painting and Processing Body Dysmorphia ............................................................ 6
Artist References .................................................................................................... 8
Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 11
Works Cited .......................................................................................................... 13
Vita ......................................................................................................................... 14
List of Figures

Figure 1: Sister Moth
Figure 2: Modern Moth
Figure 3: Mother Moth
Figure 4: Crying in the Forest
Figure 5: Spirits in the Arms of my Own
Figure 6: Drawing by Moshtari Hilal
Figure 7: Everyone’s Rug
Figure 8: A Wedding for Birds, A Marathon of Breathing
Figure 9: Tea Party
Figure 10: Woman in front of Gamsa 1
Figure 11: Woman in front of Gamsa 2
Figure 12: Painting by Asif Hoque
Figure 13: Painting by Hiba Schhabaz
Figure 14: Mother at Twenty Two
Introduction

Painting is and always has been, at its root, an exploration of identity for me. My current collection of work explores the stripping of Eurocentric beauty standards and presentation of the divine of the Brown Body to reveal my version of the human spirit. My drawings, paintings, and a hand-tufted rug all made with a surreal, colorful representation of the coming together of body and mind.

There is, what seems to be, an inherent knowledge of textiles, patterns, and design in the minds of every South Asian woman I have encountered in my life. This is the root of my thesis collection. This idea branches into the forgotten women, the place of mothers in the family and society, the replacement of brown women, the crafts and imagination stolen from brown women, and the spirit they quietly hold close. In these oil paintings, I return credit back into the hands of these women. Figure 1 is my sister, painted green to remove, just for a moment, the burden skin color. She is adorned with the fabrics she wore to a wedding, looking out to something outside our view. The focus is in her clothes, jewelry and the eyes that literally have her back. Big brown hands grip the muslin fabric as it shimmers in the light in Figure 2. The power of being from the era of technology in her hands, while dressed in the garb of our people. Mother Moth, in Figure 3, is my mother. With her eyes of knowledge peaking out from her hair, she is dressed in one of my personal favorite sharis of hers. There is power in this bold color, maximalist pattern, and adornment.
Personal References

I was privileged to grow up with Bangladeshi textile artifacts that became symbols of the culture and of my own history- and then my future. These symbols are both public and private-from small moments in my mother’s closet where she showed me gold from her wedding to weddings where we danced to the songs of her country wearing the fabrics that we loved. This intimate knowledge of things is the step ladder to understanding how I visually want to represent my identity. I am thankful that the visual history of my culture is so vibrant that it can be a vehicle with which I can represent this part of myself.

I grew up with a mother and aunts who all knew how to sew. I grew up surrounded by framed fabrics embroidered with scenes of Bangladesh’s rivers, speckled with fishing boats and village women carrying decorated water jugs. In all my years of making, it wasn’t until I picked up embroidery in 2018 that my mother lit up with a joy I had never seen before. I spent day in and day out learning designs, sewing in sequins and beads — and she, coming to me with yards of hand detailed *sharis* she pulled out of her armoire with designs she thought would inspire me. It was a language she could finally share with her American daughter, living in a world where not much is handmade anymore. From childhood, extravagant designs, colorful fabrics, intricate embroidery, abundant sequins, and ornate jewelry have been the visage of my culture. This is not due to an elite social or financial status but a representation of thousands of years of Asian aesthetic design. In my world, there was no such thing as minimalism.

It is true that real-world events have threatened the possibility of continuing these visual traditions. This visual language of color and festivity has been thriving despite British colonization, Partition in 1947, the Bangladeshi War of Independence in 1971, and consistent poverty and exploitation from western countries, corporations, and corruption. I would rather focus on the women, the spirit, and the making of traditional textiles and patterns in a variety of media, and attempt to emphasize what has been important to me about my ideas of beauty. I hope to play a part in making this visual language, because it’s important to me to explicate this aspect of my culture and note upon its persistence despite adversity.

Drawings, Energy, Surrealism, and the Segue into Painting

My work wishes to relieve this feeling of discomfort by peeling back from the gender and racial conforming expectations of a body and illustrating a colorful world of joy and raw emotion. My line drawings are on tan or brown Rives BFK rag paper. The brown paper is an homage and a homecoming to my skin color. The energy bodies were the beginning of this journey of connecting to my body and how I wanted to represent the human form, especially the brown woman form in my work. The forehead arm represents what the mind is doing, trying for, aspiring to - unconsciously or not. The body arm represents what is actually happening in earthly reality. The idea is to show the togetherness or disconnection of the two, as the spirit moves with or against the body. In Figure 4, the forehead hands are holding each other with great care, and that emotional connection is the real truth of those line works.
The subjects in these works have genderless, some iris-less features - with an arm coming out of the forehead and the neck transforming into an arm as well. These “energy bodies,” as I call them, will have they/them pronouns. The arms represent the body and mind and are depicted participating in celebratory activities together - illustrating a joining of the physical embodiment of the spirit and the spirit itself. The creating of this figure allowed me to hide from my physical insecurities – what I perceive as my fat neck, weird hands, and round but angular facial structure. In one image, two energy body figures are holding each other with their mind arms and catching or wiping tears with their body arms. Between the two body arms, a flower grows. In another, an energy body is discovering a mushroom with one arm and touching their empty eyeball with the finger of another arm. This mushroom is given to them by a flower that is also embracing them. A flower gives the energy bodies a mushroom while also embracing them. This imagery portrays the nature of giving from the environment through the botanical, and the beauty of discovery. The energy body touches within by touching its eye as it is being presented with a gift.

The Afghan-German artist Moshtari Hilal, used black linework drawing to present faces and familial scenes in a semi-autobiographical work. In her collection “Embrace the Face,” she highlights middle eastern noses, and in other works she hides the faces of other middle
eastern folk behind everyday objects, plants, or hands. Each drawing is complete with detailed lines for the unibrows, long black hair of her family, and patterns in Afghan clothing. Her work is ever evolving and complicated, but she has influenced me in her linework and in her view of herself within politics. She said in an interview, “since my biography as a refugee, female body, Muslim raised and educated person is political, everything I do could be read as political too.” This kind of thinking released me from making deliberate political work, and instead work that is intentional and rooted in a personal history. Drawing is focused, direct, and honest and Hilal has influenced my delicate deliberation when it comes to it.

![Figure 6: Title Unknown, Moshtari Hilal](image)

There are religious and cultural motifs throughout my works with symbols ranging from botanicals to familial practices. The hands with *alta*¹ on the hands of the spirit bodies and the rug in Figure 7 both represent the arts - we wear the Alta during classical and folk dances in many arts of South Asia to bring attention to the different *murdas*² portrayed during the dance. Bangladesh is a lush, tropical country where there is daily culinary, social, cultural, and spiritual uses of plants. In Islam there is Eid, a religious holiday that comes twice a year. In Bangladesh it is customary to receive one new item of clothing every Eid, usually handmade by a tailor because it is less costly than buying pre-made clothes. Textile work is deeply ingrained in the culture, from hand embroidery to weaving, and tailoring is a large part of the workforce. In 2021, Bangladesh is one of the cheap garment capitals of the world, with companies like H&M, Forever21, and Walmart outsourcing their garment work to factories there. These factories have

---
¹ red natural paint, used on the top sections of fingers and thumb, circle in the center of palm
² Hand gestures that create specific symbols such as lotus flower, deer, come forth, shy etc.
dangerous living conditions and fast fashion is forcing laborers to work for vastly low wages. There is so much extravagance in color and sparkle and joy in the artifacts of Bangladesh and the larger Indian Subcontinent despite its youth and impoverishment. Compared to the west, which is fully settling into a more minimalist style in most aspects of visual representation. As shown in Figure 8 and most other works, I reject this minimalist style but not to reject my American side. I am fully American and fully Bangladeshi - but in the context of this journey within my work I am beginning to learn how I want to represent how I wish to display my Bengali side to the American world. The Bengali side requires nurturing in the west, otherwise it may be under threat of being lost.

In one painting, the energy body is holding fabric scissors in one arm and holding flowing, embroidered fabric in another. This fabric is red and gold, celebratory colors of Bangladesh, floating amongst fading lily pads - a motif derived from the Water Lily, Bangladesh’s national flower. Under the fabric there are dancing feet, adorned with ghungroos (Figure 6). This contrast between the reality of Bangladeshi textile workers daily conditions and the celebration of textiles as a part of culture is part of my focus. There is a narrative of persevering and maintaining softness despite immediate. The realities of factory work are not present, except perhaps for the figural contortions and disembodiments, but I consider this part of the beauty of the body and a representation of my past and identity. I also associate a dream-like Surrealism with these aspects of the paintings and drawings.

The facial features are important to the work because the eyes, nose, lips, and facial bone structure are clearly Bengali. In literature and in common knowledge from the Indian Subcontinent, Bengali people are known to have large eyes. Personally, when my ethnicity has seemed ambiguous to another South Asian person - more often than not they will distinctly eliminate other nationalities like Pakistani or Nepali because of my eyes. Round faces, rounded noses, and medium to large sets of lips are also common. In the era of the Kardashians, the trend
of co-opting black and brown features is regularly practiced. It is now a part of the Western beauty standard to get lip injections, over-line one's lips, imitate higher cheekbones, and tan one's skin to match up to the Kardashian effect. This trend is insulting and minimizing for me.

Painting and Processing Body Dysmorphia

Growing up as a Bengali girl in the United States in the 1990s and transitioning to the 2000s, I saw in real time as my natural facial features suddenly became appealing after years of colorism and internalized racism had already set into my subconscious, leading to severe body dysmorphia. I started to see the transition from thin eyebrows to thick full eyebrow trends and cosmetic products and the way people suddenly found brownness, thick hair, and wide features beautiful as insincere and grotesque. This feeling is common amongst other Black and Brown people who also have witnessed this transition.

This part of the journey and process in this collection led me to making the “Moth” works. I began to make larger necks, make the heads larger and more angular, paint the eyes so they are startlingly apparent, and paint really, really big hands. I consciously reference the hands like my own, how they seem to me to be misshapen, but they also act as the generators of my creative output. This is the literal way of showing the union of body and mind. They allow me to paint. The making of this collection took me from hiding from ages old insecurities to accentuating them. They became the forefront of how I represent the human figure to the viewer and to myself.

Figure 8: “A Wedding for Birds, a Marathon of Breathing” Oil on Canvas, 24x30”
In Figure 9, three energy bodies are having a tea party with all their arms participating in one way or another. The image includes tia pahki\(^3\), which are native to Bangladesh. The subjects are surrounded by a vortex of colors, as well as steam from the tea, sugar cubes, and flowing tea (Figure 7). What is known as English Black Tea and the idea of tea time was brought to the Indian subcontinent through British colonization. It was then transformed by the colonized people into the tea Bangali Cha\(^4\) that I grew up with - black tea, evaporated milk, and sugar. In India, chai has masala, but in Bangladesh cha made with moshola\(^5\) is called Rong cha (color tea) for its classic red color.

![Figure 9: “Tea Party” Oil on Canvas, 30x30” 2020](image)

Even though painting is my primary medium, it has fluctuated in terms of expressing these energy bodies. In one painting an energy body is brown, and in another there are multiple bodies tangled within one another - all various hues of the primary colors. The focus of the paintings, however, is the activities they are participating in, the connection to Bengali culture, and how it has immigrated to the West along with its people. Oil painting itself as a medium has allowed me room to use vibrant color and freedom to create detailed, unusual figures.

---

3 Bangladeshi Parakeets
4 Tea, made with evaporated milk and black tea leaves
5 cloves, lay leaves, cardamom seed, peppercorn, cinnamon stick
Artist References

Art Deco is popularly known for its shift in architecture and home design, but for the research for my current body of work Art Deco paintings embodied a lush representation of this steel-studded era. As these paintings were a product of industrialization, I thought it an appropriate style to learn from to create a portrait of an Asian woman now being exploited because of the effects of industrialization in the fashion industry. The dramatic quality of the contrast, resembling a contemporary chiaroscuro, and near expressionless faces allowed for serene yet bold imagery (Lucie-Smith).

Intentional extreme contrast, like in Tamara de Lempicka’s “Autoportrait,” I created incredible ripples and sharpness in the rendering of fabric in my work. I thought it an appropriate juxtaposition to use stylize the underrepresented and underpaid foreign working class women in the vision of their industrial oppressor, the cause of their suffering. In the way Nimisha Bhanot and Kehinde Wiley use romanticized and royal portraiture to reclaim and make known the unknown faces of their communities, I want to do the same. My use of color, is personal and emotional. De Lempicka’s paintings of women enhanced the facial look, the stare, that captured me. I rendered my women to have a look whose emotion could not be pinpointed, but would not let the viewer look away.

Asif Hoque is a contemporary oil painter based in New York and of Bangladeshi heritage. His surreal representations of brown bodies have inspired me to push the boundaries of
how a brown body could be represented as and constantly revisit the origins of the previous expectations of perfection I had for myself. His vigorous use of red-brown paint and depiction of people in their angelic form with wings and twinkling eyes against a blank linen canvas is one convincing of joy and I would like to be a part of that lineage of thinking (Yossi Milo).
Hiba Schahbaz is a miniature painter who paints an ethereal image of her naked self in dream-like paintings. The focus of her work is her wistfully painted and magically detailed brown body and long black hair. Moshtari Hilal’s black ink linework drawings highlight the abundance and beauty of the eastern nose and abundance of thick, black hair. Asif Hoque’s oil paintings illuminate a surreal, angelic vision of the rich, brown body. Painter Nadia Waheed focuses on the same female brown body, but in her own intuitive, introspective way. There is a generation of artists reclaiming their visage and presenting it to the western world of art in their own language. I speak that language and am hoping this collection of work is my new collection of poetry (Schahbaz).

In Figure 14, I reference the poem in my conclusion. This entire narrative is also a story of my mother and my journey to unlearn her fear. Fears of shame, inadequacy in the western sphere, the insecurity of an immigrant woman - despite her Masters in Literature and her rich personal history or art making and poetry writing. I am making my visage strong for her.
Conclusion

My thesis exhibition was the culmination of my practice throughout the MFA. I struggled through making the work and my ideas, as evidenced in a poem written while trying to make an artist’s statement:

“A moth, fighting a cocoon. Building legs and wings only to have more eyes than it had planned. It had nothing planned. It had some plans. The room is full of light, everywhere and scattered. Where do we go from here?

There is so much calling me.
My wings may be made of Jamdani, or maybe that is my daughter’s name.

Each line is a jewel and each jewel was made by someone we have all forgotten. My parents were moths and America a disco room. I am a moth and this society is my disco room.

Am I happy or am I searching?

All of these women are my faces, and most of them, my mother. They say you know a woman is Bengali by how big her eyes are. We do not look away.

This collection is an ode to me, my mother, my family, my people

all dancing towards a light we hope won’t kill us.”

Revisiting the idea of reclamation, I am consistently taking the styles, the rituals, and the culture in all its forms back from the oppressor and back onto the body of the South Asian woman. From the nathli\(^6\) to the bindi, from the holud\(^7\) drinks to \(^8\) practices, from Hinduism to the sacred geometry\(^9\), I wish to create a visual work returning these hallmarks to their sacred spaces away from the clutches of western capitalism. The pieces in this collection show some ritual with the tea cups for celebration. There are bats and parakeets close to the spirit bodies to show the connection not just to the culture but the land where all this influence comes from. The bindi is not the focus of the women in front of \(^10\) gamsas\(^10\) paintings but is simply befitting the person and their clothes. This is not a literal presentation of taking something that was lost back. This process was rooted in self-discovery, self-reclamation, and research into how I want to present the joy of being Bengali to the world as well as myself. I went from creating the spirit

\(^6\) nose ring that connects to the hair via chain

\(^7\) turmeric, used in food and ceremonies

\(^8\) a spiritual and meditative Vedic practice

\(^9\) Sacred geometry ascribes symbolic and sacred meanings to certain geometric shapes and certain geometric proportions. It is associated with the belief that a god is the creator of the universal geometer. The geometry used in the design and construction of religious structures such as churches, temples, mosques, religious monuments, altars, and tabernacles has sometimes been considered sacred.

\(^10\) a thin towel used in Bangladesh for drying hair and body. Commonly colorful and checker or plaid patterned.
body - a character devoid of all my insecurities to strong-jawed, big handed, staring women adorned with patterns. I learned to emphasize myself in all the ways I was shamed for. In all, this collection is one of celebration, a party I am happy to throw.
Works Cited


"dartmouth.edu: Paul Calter, Polygons, Tilings, & Sacred Geometry"


Vita

The author was born in Portland, OR, USA and raised in Sacramento, CA. She received her B.A. in Political Science from the University of California, Irvine. She then went on to work in the non profit sector before moving to New Orleans, LA. After receiving her M.F.A in painting, she continues to pursue art.