

The Victory of Defeat. Migration as an Intra-Familial Device of Redemption

La victoria de la derrota. La migración como dispositivo de redención intrafamiliar

Della Puppa, Francesco*

Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage. Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy.

francesco.dellapuppa@unive.it

Abstract

This contribution is the result of wider research aimed at deepening the understanding of the social construction of masculinity during the migration experience from Bangladesh to Italy, analysing how the social construction of masculinity is shaped by this experience and, at the same time, how the migration path contributes to its unravelling. Specifically, the article is based on the life story of Hassan, a Bangladeshi man interviewed in Chandpur, Bangladesh, and the younger brother of Mukul, a migrant resident in Italy. Hassan's biography is intertwined with the profound social transformations that have emerged in Bangladesh and Italy since the 1970s and intersected by the different migratory trajectories experienced by his family. The analysis of Hassan's biography allows us to observe, on the one hand, the pressures and expectations of the socio-cultural context, which, in a given historical moment, have impacted his family, especially its male members, as a consequence of their class position. On the other hand, it is possible to observe the way in which such norms and expectations have been translated into a discipline that Hassan's family has imposed on him and, at the same time, shaped the biographical and migratory trajectories of other male family members. Keywords: biographical trajectories, return migration, social expectations, family honour, masculinity.

Keywords: Biographical Trajectories; Emotions; Social Expectations; Family Honour; Masculinity.

Resumen

Esta contribución es el resultado de una investigación más amplia destinada a profundizar en la comprensión de la construcción social de la masculinidad durante la experiencia migratoria de Bangladesh a Italia, analizando cómo esta construcción social de la masculinidad se ve influida por dicha experiencia y, al mismo tiempo, cómo el recorrido migratorio contribuye a su desmoronamiento. Específicamente, el artículo se basa en la historia de vida de Hassan, un hombre bangladés entrevistado en Chandpur, Bangladesh, y hermano menor de Mukul, un migrante residente en Italia. La biografía de Hassan está entrelazada con las profundas transformaciones sociales que han emergido en Bangladesh e Italia desde la década de 1970, y se cruza con las diversas trayectorias migratorias vividas por su familia. El análisis de la biografía de Hassan permite observar, por un lado, las presiones y expectativas del contexto sociocultural, que, en un momento histórico determinado, han impactado a su familia, especialmente a sus miembros masculinos, como consecuencia de su posición de clase. Por otro lado, es posible observar cómo esas normas y expectativas se tradujeron en una disciplina impuesta por su familia y, al mismo tiempo, modelaron las trayectorias biográficas y migratorias de otros miembros masculinos de la familia.

Palabras clave: Trayectorias biográficas; Emociones; Expectativas sociales; Honor familiar; Masculinidad.

*PhD in Social Sciences from the University of Padua, Italy. Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy. Member of the Laboratory for Social Research (LARIS) and of the Observatory on Digital, Posted, and Precarious Work (OLD).
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1437-4719>

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Biographies and Masculinities

In recent decades, the use of the biographical approach from a transnational perspective has been successfully adopted in the field of feminist and gender studies, although mainly by focusing on women's transnational biographies (Apitzsch & Siouti, 2014), while it has been applied far less frequently to the gender analysis of men's migratory trajectories. In general, the process of the social construction of gender among migrant men and the negotiation of masculinities within the migratory experience constitute research topics that have rarely been explored in depth in the sociological literature.

Therefore, here, I will reconstruct the biography of Hassan, a Bangladeshi man interviewed in Chandpur, Bangladesh, the younger brother of Mukul, a migrant residing with his family in Italy. The analysis of his biography makes it possible to observe, on the one hand, the sociocultural pressures and expectations that, at a specific historical moment, affected his family, and, on the other, how these norms and expectations translated into a form of discipline imposed by the family on Hassan, shaping both his biographical trajectory and the migratory trajectories of other family members. In particular, I will examine Hassan's return migration in relation to Mukul's decision to emigrate, and I will analyse the consequences these events had on the biographies of both brothers. At the theoretical level, return challenges traditional paradigms of migration, while at the biographical level it represents a delicate moment in which a transformation of the migrant's role in the society of origin becomes necessary, implying a reconfiguration of the household economy, models of social mobility, and collective aspirations (Black & King, 2004; Ndione & Lombard, 2004). During his stay abroad, the migrant was subject to a form of distance inclusion through his participation in the household economy and family life; once back home, the returnee becomes an

object of exclusion within his own family and community of origin (Lecadet, 2012), especially when return results from failure.

Following a well-established sociological tradition in both North America and Europe (Lutz, 2016), I have considered the implications of the multiple identities, inequalities, opportunities, and normative constraints arising from the intersection of social class, gender, age, cultural identity, and civic stratifications. I adopt an intersectional analytical lens (Crenshaw, 1991) to capture the connections between structural dimensions, cultural constructions, and subjective decisions.

That is, the relationships between the economic and social inequality that links Bangladesh to Europe and the downward social mobility inscribed in South-North migration (Anthias, 2008), the cultural norms that shape Bangladeshi family and social life, and the individual agency of family members – particularly Hassan and, above all, Mukul. In doing so, it is necessary to consider the position of Hassan and Mukul's family within the upper-middle class, that is, the urban and educated class of a society strongly influenced by caste hierarchy.

Indeed, the caste hierarchy of Hindu society, reinforced by the British colonial system, has deeply influenced the evolution of Bangladeshi society and the entire subcontinent (Ahmad, 1978; Werbner, 1990). However, the Bengali system of social hierarchies appears to be traversed by two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, there is a marked ascriptive tendency: although various factors influence the status of social actors (occupation, education, property, capital, etc.), birth remains the basic criterion of classification. On the other hand, a movement towards greater fluidity of the social status assigned at birth can be observed, and dynamics of mobility are developing as a result of modernization processes and transnational migration (Gardner, 1995).

This sociocultural framework is embedded in a society marked by stark polarization, encompassing, on the one hand, very small groups of individuals connected to global economic circuits – an elite engaged in a vertiginous process of accumulation – and, on the other, a mass of people living in conditions of mere survival (Muhammad, 2007; Van Schendel, 2009). Between these two poles lies a struggling middle class, striving to resist the erosion of its socioeconomic position and to defend its access to private education, healthcare, and pension systems by mobilizing the capital at its disposal.

Indeed, among the resources employed, exchanged, converted, and expanded in the struggle against downward social mobility are not only economic ones but also cultural, social, and symbolic forms of capital – among which honour occupies a central place. Honour is simultaneously an individual and collective resource: individuals' behaviours, qualities, achievements, and failures affect the social credentials of the entire family, and each family member is responsible for the behaviour, accomplishments, and failures of the others.

Above all, honour and masculinity are closely interlinked, as honour can be considered men's symbolic capital and, at the same time, masculinity measures male reproductive capacity not only in the biological sphere but also in the social and economic ones. Within this dynamic, women constitute the object of symbolic exchanges among men and contribute to the reproduction of male honour (Bourdieu, 1972, 1998). It is possible to identify various domains in which honour and different forms of capital can be reproduced and increased: among these, for example, the marriage market, the labour market, university trajectories, and – in the dialectic between centres and peripheries – the transnational space and access to *bidesh*¹ through migratory mobility (Della Puppa, 2014; Gardner, 1995, 2010). The successful or failed migratory trajectory of a family member, for instance, depends on the coordinated action of the household as a whole and can enhance or undermine the honour and social credentials of all its members, as it constitutes a demonstration of the power and resources that the family can mobilize in that specific domain and, consequently, within the community.

By analysing Hassan's biography through an intersectional perspective, I will show how the process of the social construction of individual masculinity is inextricably intertwined with the honour and symbolic resources of his family, and how migration may constitute both an individual and collective strategy

¹ Bangla term referring to the "foreign land" or "countries abroad."

to increase these resources. Above all, I will demonstrate how the biographical and migratory successes and failures of one family member – in this case, Hassan – may partially determine the biographical and migratory trajectories of other family members – in this case, Mukul, Hassan's elder brother.

A Journey Through the Biographies of Migrant Men

Through the reading of the biographical trajectories of Bangladeshi men in Italy and of their male relatives in Bangladesh, I sought to understand the meaning these men attribute to the migratory experience and to analyse the entanglement of the historical–social transformations within which such experience takes shape – and by which it is, in part, oriented – as well as their individual and family life trajectories.

After reconstructing the biographies of several migrants in Italy, I asked some of them to put me in contact with their relatives in Bangladesh to collect the life stories of their male family members. In this way, I carried out a multi-sited application (Marcus, 1995) of the biographical approach, with the aim of "suturing" the split between emigration and immigration (Sayad, 1999) and thus conveying the global and transnational dimension of migratory phenomena and experiences.

The fieldwork involved prolonged periods of ethnographic practice in Italy (almost two years) and in Bangladesh (more than three months), as well as the collection of 54 biographical interviews at both poles of the migratory process: in Italy, I interviewed 25 migrants who had achieved family reunification; in Bangladesh, I interviewed 19 male relatives and 10 men whose families had been affected by different migratory experiences.

In Italy, the research took place mainly among Bangladeshi families residing in the tanning district of the province of Vicenza. In Bangladesh, the interviewees resided in the capital, Dhaka, and its suburbs; in the districts of Madaripur, Faridpur, Shariatpur, Chittagong, Comilla, Sylhet, and Chandpur, the hometown of Mukul and Hassan.

Of course, the names of the interviewees are fictitious.

A Family Counter-Narrative

I am a guest of Mukul – whom I interviewed in Italy – in the family home in Chandpur, where his elder brother, Saiful, lives, and who describes the relationships among the members of his family as follows:

We have a very close relationship in our family [...]. We are very united in the intimate bond we share [...]. I think that now we live as a joint family and, if I live another twenty years, I will try to maintain this situation. (Interview 1, 10th February 2013, Chandpur)

Mukul and Saiful have two sisters and another brother, the youngest of the five, named Hassan. Their family is one of the best known and most respected in Chandpur. They belong to the city's progressive bourgeoisie. The father was a renowned lawyer who practised between Chandpur and Dhaka, thereby ensuring his five sons and daughters access to university, as well as leaving them an elegant mansion that today houses the families of his three sons.

Saiful, the firstborn, who inherited the honour and the duty of following in his father's footsteps by continuing his work in the family law firm and becoming a respected lawyer and a successful politician, is the reason for my stay in Chandpur. He is also the family member who bears the legitimate responsibility of representing family honour – and, consequently, his own honour as the eldest brother and “guardian of the family” – in the public setting of the interview with the researcher, through a positive image of family management, the beneficial use of its capital, and the social and economic achievements of its members. Indeed, it was he who, through Mukul from Italy, contacted me and arranged the meeting for the interview.

During my stay in the house, which for generations has belonged to the family through the paternal line, I happen to meet Hassan, the youngest son, who asks me whether I am also interested in hearing his life story. I accept enthusiastically, even though Mukul, in Italy, had not anticipated that I would encounter a second narrator, and Saiful himself had not mentioned the possibility of meeting his brother. I would understand the reason for this only after hearing Hassan's words, the youngest of the brothers in a middle-class family.

Indeed, Hassan seized and used this opportunity to speak for himself, in order to convey a family story different from the legitimate – and honourable – family narrative represented by his elder brother, Saiful.

Hassan recounts his own story as the favourite son of his parents, a serene boy surrounded by friends and relatives.

To reconstruct his life, Hassan uses as an individual and collective turning point the year of Ban-

gladesh's independence, achieved after what Bangladeshi historiography refers to as the *Liberation War* or *Muktijuddho*, whereas Pakistani historiography frames it as the “Indo-Pakistani War”.² Independence should have represented the fulfilment of the expectations of the rural subaltern classes and the educated urban middle classes, through a radical transformation of the social and economic fabric. The political and social effervescence of the years immediately following independence also enthused the young Hassan, who, however, now describes his disillusionment and his ideological affiliation with bitterness.

Despite the largely unmet expectations of social change, Hassan adopts the experience of liberation and independence as a turning point that marks a before and after in his individual life, as well as in the collective imaginary of Bangladesh. Starting from that reference, he describes himself and situates his date of birth in a country that did not have an efficient civil registration system until “five or six years after independence”.

In addition to staging the dialectic between individual history and social history, between the individual and society, Hassan's words constitute a family counter-narrative that seeks to offer a representation aimed at deconstructing and questioning the one presented by his elder brother, Saiful – the guardian of the family, the person authorised to represent family relations and achievements and to preserve the respectability of the household in front of the outsider or “the foreigner” – that is, in front of me, the researcher.

2 Bangladesh was born as an independent state in 1971, following a bloody war of independence against Pakistan. It was a conflict that can be interpreted as an indirect confrontation among the different world powers already involved in the Cold War: European democracies and the United States supported Pakistan, given that, for historical reasons, it could play the role of mediator between the United States and China, while the Soviet Union allied itself with India in its support for Bangladesh. China remained neutral, at least formally, despite its close alliances with Pakistan (Ali, 1971; Jacques, 2000; Sisson and Rose, 1990). On 26 March of that same year, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the *Awami League* – the party that led the guerrilla war – proclaimed independence and formed the first government, becoming prime minister. The constituent assembly adopted a constitution that identified socialism, democracy, the economic emancipation of the working class, and secularism as its main foundations (Ahmed, 2009). The country, in addition to emancipating itself from what was perceived as an internal colonialism perpetrated by West Pakistan, had to renew the organisation of production and the system of social and cultural relations, which were feudal in character (Chanda, 1973).

An Individual and Collective Epiphany

The positive image that Hassan constructs of his youth is also reinforced by his academic achievements, to the point of having gained access to the most prestigious university in the country – where only one out of every eighty applicants is admitted – and of having obtained a special scholarship to study in the Soviet Union.

This biographical detail allows us to glimpse the international diplomatic relations in which the young People's Republic was involved, but also the decisive weight of political organisations in various spheres of social action. Indeed, it forms part of the close relationship that Bangladesh maintained with the Soviet Union from its very inception.³ It also reveals how, in Bangladeshi society, everything depends – yesterday as today, or at least until the summer of 2024 – on the degree of alignment with the ruling party or with the hegemonic influence that different political forces may exert, including access to health services, to the public and private labour market, to university admission, and to the allocation of resources.⁴

The official history of the country and its international relations intertwine with the family and individual history of Hassan and influence his trajectory: on the one hand, the ties between Bangladesh and the Soviet Union; on the other, Hassan's political affiliation with a pro-Soviet student organisation, in accordance with his family's political tradition, which granted him privileged access to migration.

Hassan's golden youth extended throughout his years of university training, until it reached an unnameable event, an infamy that affected the honour of his family of origin even before his own.

Access to the University of Dhaka and the scholarship at a Russian university led Hassan and his entire family to an improvement in their social position, further increasing the esteem and public recog-

nition they already enjoyed in the city of Chandpur. By contrast, the failure of his studies and his migratory project, the loneliness and emotional impact linked to an unrequited sentimental attraction towards a Russian woman – whom Hassan barely mentions, referring to her as “mental problems,” but who would later be named by his brother Saiful – drove him to return to Bangladesh, where the attitudes of his relatives and friends towards him changed radically.

This is the guilt that weighs on Hassan, a guilt he himself cannot fully name. On the one hand, he went through a moment of psychological and emotional fragility, which allows us to glimpse the inner distress associated with the weight of an indelible stigma, quickly classified within the category of shameful illnesses. On the other hand, he maintained an illegitimate romantic relationship, as it had not been previously approved by his family: a relationship born of irrational passion rather than of rational marriage, and one that was also not homogamous – as would be expected for an individual of his social status within Bangladeshi society. It is an epiphany that will alter the anticipated course of Hassan's life and that will affect not only his biographical trajectory but also, as will be shown later, that of Mukul (Denzin, 1989).

In other words, it represents a turning point that will impact the lives of other family members, triggering a chain of events that will irreparably compromise Hassan's life and whose magnitude can only be assessed retrospectively.

Having failed within the educational system – which had initially bestowed honour and prestige upon the entire household – and being marked by the stigma of psychological illness, Hassan became, together with his family, an object of ridicule in the eyes of the community, provoking the disapproval of his relatives and the distancing of his friends.

To understand the reaction of Hassan's friends and family circle, it is useful to recall that in Bangladesh university education is a prerogative of the most affluent sectors of society. For this reason, achieving a high educational level – even though it is essential for improving or maintaining one's socio-material status – is all the more difficult.

Likewise, one must not forget the particular history that led to the creation of Bangladesh, whose liberation war took its first steps at the University of Dhaka with the support of numerous middle-class students (Van Schendel, 2009). In this way, the university of the capital is considered a national monument, while obtaining a degree – especially from that institution – remains one of the highest indicators of

3 It was a relationship that lasted for approximately twenty years, thanks to the persistence of a non-alignment policy in the Bangladeshi parliament, and that made possible the establishment of numerous scholarships through which thousands of young Bangladeshis travelled each year to the Soviet Union or to other Warsaw Pact countries to pursue university studies (Priori, 2012).

4 This is true to the extent that, at times, the alternation in power of rival political forces may entail, for those linked to the sectors that suddenly move into the opposition, a sudden expulsion from the educational or occupational circuits in which they were previously situated, and even, in some cases, a risk to their own physical safety. This also helps explain the hardening of the *Awami League* government, in power during the last decade, as well as the uprisings – led, once again, by students – that brought about its fall in August 2024.

social prestige, a mark of distinction, and a powerful reproducer of social stratification.

In societies of the Indian subcontinent, strongly influenced by caste hierarchy, including those with a Muslim majority (Ahmad, 1978; Werbner, 1990), this goal constitutes a kind of social duty for middle-class and upper-middle-class families such as Hassan's.

Thus, this helps explain the expectations that Hassan's family placed upon him, as the youngest son, brother, and promising student, and especially upon his academic trajectory within a socio-geographical context considered prestigious. Indeed, the prestige conferred by the Soviet Union – as a central space in relation to the economic and political hierarchies of the “world-system” (Wallerstein, 1979), as well as by its university system – would have reflected symbolically upon Hassan and his family through his migratory experience (Gardner, 2010).

By contrast, one can understand the profound disappointment experienced by Hassan's family in the face of his failure. Moreover, it is important to underline that, after the initial enthusiasm for national independence expressed by the most progressive sectors of the country's bourgeoisie, the newly founded People's Republic of Bangladesh underwent a long period of political instability, compounded by severe economic precariousness resulting from structural adjustments and intense privatisation campaigns imposed by international financial institutions (Chossudovsky, 2003; Muhammad, 2007). In such a context, the only possibility for reactivating upward social mobility for young people from middle and upper-middle classes was international migration, an attempt that Hassan undertook unsuccessfully.

At the same time, Hassan's narrative expresses his frustration with the persistent system of patronage that characterises Bangladeshi society. His socio-political story is structured around a “patron-client” relationship linked to party leaders, public figures, or economically influential actors with whom members of Hassan's family may be associated. This relational logic penetrates interpersonal dynamics so deeply that it comes to interfere in other spheres, such as friendship, making it difficult to discern the affective processes that sometimes underlie them.

In Hassan's case, this dimension became even more evident when his public and social rise was affected by a crisis. Indeed, his words reveal the greyness and profound loneliness that accompany his daily life, as well as the social consequences of his failure – the severity of which, he himself probably never imagined.

Discipline and Reflexivity

In the narration of his life, Hassan arrives at the moment of creating his own family, which begins with his marriage to a woman chosen by his family of origin. This event constitutes the response to his problems or, more precisely, Hassan's adaptation to the social and familial pressure linked to the social construction of his masculinity, his entry into adult life, and the defence of the honour and social respectability of his household.

In fact, after the subversion of family and friendship expectations caused by the failure of his university studies and by his emotional and personal difficulties, Hassan is obliged, by the family circle, to realign himself with community expectations regarding the marital status considered appropriate for his age. Marriage forms part of a disciplinary process imposed on Hassan by the family and one that will also determine his occupational, family, and parental trajectory, so that he may be recognised as an adult man and to preserve, at least partially, the respectability of the other men in his family. At the same time, the marriage arranged for him by his brothers may be interpreted as a strategy to address his inevitable expulsion from the marriage market, linked to the failure of his migratory project. Indeed, his return does not constitute the result of success nor the achievement of his goals in the *bidesh* (Cavatorta, 2017); that is, it is neither a “return of innovation” nor a “return of conservation” (Cerase, 1971). On the contrary, it represents an evidently failed trajectory, capable of compromising his own success (and that of his relatives) in other social dimensions, such as marriage (Hirvonen & Lilleør, 2014).

Only the occupational sphere appears to constitute Hassan's modest refuge from a daily life marked by distress and discomfort. By contrast, his relationship with his son (despite the intense affection that Hassan expresses for him) and – even more so – his relationship with his wife remain sources of disappointment in a daily life filled with constant reminders that “one must be content with what one has”: a maxim to which he has resigned himself in order not to compromise further the respectability of his family of origin and to avoid new social sanctions. This leads him to question marriage and couple relationships, both “love marriages” and arranged marriages, which remain socially legitimate in Bangladeshi society.

Hassan's reflections thus reveal the social norms and values that still regulate the marriage market in Bangladesh.⁵ Above all, Hassan describes

⁵ Marriage outside the practice of arranged marriages, although today more common than in the past – especially among the

the mediocrity that characterises his married life, the result of an arranged marriage. In his words one can also glimpse a “game of marital compensations” characteristic of a hierarchical and ascriptive society, in which conjugal exchanges unfold according to the already mentioned homogamous logic (Hirschon, 1984).

The marriage market constitutes a space in which honour and the various forms of capital are reproduced, increased, or at least preserved; it also contributes to improving the social status of the individual and of his family, in accordance with a hypergamous model in which members of a family of lower status may ascend socially through an advantageous marital exchange.

The variables involved in the marital contract include the qualities ascribed by birth, the possession of material or symbolic resources, and the social trajectories of the spouses. Thus, the absence of certain characteristics or resources may be compensated by the possession of other assets. In this way, if Hassan can claim his belonging to a middle-class family, he simultaneously carries a dishonourable stigma. By contrast, Hassan’s wife likely comes from a lower social class, but she accepted marrying a man considered “stupid” or “a failure,” by virtue of his class status. However, such an exchange – as Hassan seems to suggest – does not exempt his wife from casting looks of reproach and compassion towards him, nor from constituting a relationship that is not very satisfying, although sufficient to comply with social norms and community expectations.

His experience of fatherhood and the account Hassan offers of his relationship with his son lead him to reflect upon his own filial bond with his father and, once again, upon the dichotomy between love and rationality that he uses to describe his conjugal relationship.

Within this dichotomy, Hassan appears to wish to distance himself from the paternal model which, although he recognises as a reference, he seeks to transcend, claiming a disinterested love for his son: an affection detached from the social or personal achievements that the child may or may not attain and, therefore, from the family’s symbolic capital that such achievements could increase or place at risk.

urban and educated middle classes (De Silva, 2005) – is still socially discouraged and is represented as the result of instinctive impulses rather than rationality: the product of a passionate love that, by its very nature, may fade or be reproduced toward another person.

The fact that Hassan’s father-in-law – and not Hassan – decided his son’s name symbolically links the grandson to the maternal line and not to the paternal one, while the father – Hassan – is relegated to the margins and to the shadows, as befits a “stupid man,” a sick man, or a deviant.

In Hassan’s narration a clear conflict emerges between two languages and two logics. On the one hand, that of affection and love, which he would aspire to; on the other, that of social and familial conventions, both those of his family of origin and those of his wife’s family. In any case, between these two family systems, Hassan occupies a subordinate position. He accepts the decisions that his family made for him, accepts maintaining a mediocre relationship with his wife and even with his son, accepts his position of subordination even in his intimate life.

Hassan’s serene narration – which leaves even the translator, Zaeed, silent and astonished beside me – speaks of his personal tragedy and of his passive acceptance of a future already determined, constantly returning to the stigma through which he is defined. He lives an improvised life, constructed by others, and adapts to it, adhering to the expectations of his relatives so as not to compromise further the image, reputation, and honour of his family. At the same time, however, he asserts – despite what his brothers had planned for my visit – that those were not his decisions, even if he considers them acceptable.

A Redeemed Biography

Within this biographical framework lies Mukul’s migratory experience, which appears as an attempt – unconscious and embodied – to redraw the image of the family, restore its respectability, and recover the honour compromised by the failure of his younger brother, Hassan. Within this biographical framework lies Mukul’s migratory experience, which appears as an attempt – unconscious and embodied – to redraw the image of the family, restore its respectability, and recover the honour compromised by the failure of his younger brother, Hassan.

Whereas Saiful, as the firstborn, finds his place in the family genealogy by ensuring the continuity of the paternal business and managing the family’s assets, it becomes Mukul’s responsibility – as the second son – to redeem Hassan’s failure and the family’s honour in public perception through a new migratory investment. This effort is also embedded in the gendered variations that characterise migration from Bangladesh to Europe, in which the family member

who initiates the migratory chain is, in most cases, a man.

The opening of new migratory horizons – such as Italy and southern Europe – and the identification of a strategy of upward mobility among the middle and upper-middle classes in the European migratory experience⁶ contributed to the creation of migratory networks woven by the educated masses of young Bangladeshis. This migratory opportunity was seized by Mukul, in the interplay between this transnational framework and the need to repair the partial damage caused to his family's social prestige.

Today, Mukul works as a labourer in Italy; despite the inadequacy of his position in the Italian labour market in comparison with the social status of his family of origin, this job allows him to accumulate significant economic capital, reactivate upward social mobility for himself and for his family and, consequently, recover family honour, symbolic capital, and social credentials for the benefit of the lineage as a whole. Indeed, it is through the entire family that, positively or negatively, the behaviour of the different members and the possibilities and expectations of each one collectively reverberate.

Moreover, by migrating to Europe, Mukul restores not only his own desirability in the marriage market, but also that of the other family members, previously compromised. His stay in Italy is therefore oriented towards compensating for Hassan's failure in the eyes of the Chandpur community. At the same time, it constitutes a way of repairing, through remittances, the torn system of family relations, seeking to meet the material needs of each member and to reunite all the men once again under the roof of the paternal home, enlarged with the resources sent from Italy.

Even Hassan, in fact, reserves words of special praise for Mukul – the only one who “would not think only of himself” and who would have sacrificed himself for the collective good – within an account entirely oriented towards discrediting the idealised image

⁶ In the 1990s, the countries of Southern Europe – such as Italy – began to consolidate themselves as migratory destinations for the population coming from Bangladesh. This phenomenon is related to the closing of the borders of Central and Northern European countries (Priori, 2012), to the complete transformation of Italy from a country of emigration to a country of immigration (Pugliese, 2006), and to the reconfiguration of its labour market, which required a flexible and low-cost workforce, supported by “instrumentally lax” migration policies (Della Puppa, 2014).

of the family that had been conveyed to me by the elder brother, Saiful.

Mukul does not explicitly address the reasons for his migration or, rather, he describes in general terms his willingness to find a job – although, as he himself mentions, he had not yet completed his university studies – with which he could support his family. At most, Saiful, the elder brother – like Hassan himself – connects or, at least, temporally associates Hassan's migratory failure and return with Mukul's decision to interrupt his studies and leave the country:

My younger brother, Mukul, was studying at Jagannath University, but he did not complete his master's degree because he decided to go to Jeddah. Then, from Saudi Arabia he went to Italy. It was his own personal decision. He decided to leave the country when Hassan returned from Russia, from Armenia. Hassan was at the University of Medical Sciences, but he could not complete his studies, so he returned home. (Interview 1, 10th February 2013, Chandpur)

Apparently, therefore, Mukul does not present his decision as a migration aimed at remedying the impact that his younger brother's failure had on the family's image and respectability. However, this omission must be considered evident and, in a way, reinforces the interpretation of his migratory experience as a reparative migration.

On the one hand, the intentional meaning of his action is inscribed in the cultural and class habitus that governs his life; consequently, his sociocultural dispositions oriented his migratory choice, even if he had not consciously adopted such a purpose (Bourdieu, 1994). On the other hand, Mukul remains silent about his brother's failure. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Mukul, from Italy, was the one who contacted me and arranged my interview with Saiful and not with Hassan – who, for his part, took the initiative to speak to me independently and unexpectedly. This was both to prevent me from gathering a representation of the family that would compromise their honour and respectability, and because Hassan is considered by his brothers an unreliable person, a “stupid man” and a failure who deserves no consideration whatsoever.

A Multilevel Biography, an Imaginary Dialogue, a Desperate Attempt at Self-Rehabilitation

I have not maintained good relations with my family. I have survived

I have not maintained good relations with my family. I have survived. [...] for about nineteen years [...]. The situation in our family is that everyone thinks of themselves, except my brother Mukul. I believe I am not an exception; I am like that too: we all think of ourselves. My sisters [...] do not know what we do, and we do not know what they do. We all live [...] as we see fit.

[...] I was born before the independence of Bangladesh, in 1971. I was born in 1965 or 1966 [...], but I do not know my exact date of birth because [...] this is the condition of Bangladeshi society [...] many children, many people [...]. I think 90% of people do not know their exact date of birth. And I do not know mine either. I was born in '65 or '66 and, when Bangladesh faced the war against Pakistan – against West Pakistan –, I was a child and what I remember [...]. I do not remember it very well, but [...] some things do come to my mind: after the revolu... I mean... after independence, I started going to school and my mother and my father loved me. They loved all the children in the family, and I was not the youngest, but the fourth. Then another sister was born after me. My mother loved me very much. We were middle class. We lived in a good social environment. I had many brothers, many brothers – I mean, friends like brothers; we played together, we enjoyed together, we went to school together [...] it was a different environment. [...] I was so young... We thought there would be a revolution in Bangladesh, but [...] it did not happen. How naïve we were! But... I am still a communist [...]. Many things have changed: our outlook, our ideas, our way of thinking, our relationship with people... but I am still a communist. I am still a communist. (Interview 2, 11th February 2013, Chandpur)

No one accepts me normally

I was a good student. After finishing school, I took an exam at the University of Dhaka and obtained a place there. Then, after three or four months, I went to Russia, to the Soviet Union [...] I was a

member of the Bangladesh Student Union [BSU, an important radical left student organisation that would later become the Communist Party of Bangladesh], just like my elder brother [...]. He was the president of the BSU in Chandpur. I submitted an application in Dhaka, and two years later I was granted a scholarship. [...] When I was in Russia I had some problems, mainly mental problems, so I returned. And [...] when I came back to Bangladesh [...] my friends, my family, my relatives [...] did not receive me warmly. I went through a hard time. Five or six years [...] six, seven years [...] the environment had changed a lot. So I thought that my friends [...] I discovered that they were becoming more and more distant from me. And for six, seven, eight, nine, ten years, I had almost no friends. I had almost no friends. And now [...] just now, yes, I tell you, I am without my brothers and sisters, I have no relatives. I mean, I do not maintain any relationship with them. None, because no one accepts me normally, so I have also kept my distance from them. Afterwards, I studied for a degree and obtained a second class, and I got a job as a teacher in a primary school. Then, little by little, I created a new [social] circle. I survived. For about nineteen years I have been disconnected from many people. [...] My father was shocked when I returned. He was shaken because I had not obtained any certificate or degree. No one in Bangladesh received me normally. Some were disappointed in me. People said: "He is no longer a trustworthy person."

After many years, I now work, I have friends, but everything has changed a lot. Back then I was alone, everyone disappeared, friends avoided me, they treated me badly; they thought: "He is finished, we have no reason to stay in contact with him." If you are solvent and progressing, everything is fine, and people think: "He is my friend, he is a good man." But when you fall into difficulties, they may change their way of thinking. I learned one thing: if I had a lot of money, if I were a doctor, they would come to visit me, spend time with me, be kind and be interested in maintaining a relationship with me, even those who are now increasingly distant. But since I fell into disgrace, they left me alone. (Interview 2, 11th February 2013, Chandpur)

The name of my son is Abdullah

I did not decide to get married; rather, my family forced me to do so. I was destined to marry, because everyone told me that I had to. I had no

choice; I had to accept. Of course. So I gave my consent. When they told me: "You have to get married, you must get married!"; then I gave them my word: "All right, I will do it." It was an arranged marriage, a combined marriage. Combined and organised by my brothers.

After the marriage, thanks to my family's contacts, I obtained this job as a teacher. The salary is enough for me. Since I had a son, my economic needs increased and I began working more and more. I am busy with my work. I like being busy and now I like my job. I enjoy what I do. Because when I carry out my work, people appreciate me. Now I have my school. The people in my school accept me, they esteem me, they receive me warmly. That is why I enjoy my work, my service, my duty.

Then, after the marriage, I was pressured to have a child. When my wife became pregnant and my son was born [...] when I heard the news, I felt happy and joyful. But I do not have time for him. I leave home in the morning, when he is still sleeping, and I return at ten at night [...] Yes, sometimes I take him to visit different places, but I cannot give him much time, and that is why he wants [...] loves his mother more than me. Yes, my son loves his mother more than me. And I am fine with that. Our relationship is based [...] on that ground. I cannot spend much time with him and he spends his time with his mother. I do not mind. I am happy that he is happy with his mother. I simply return home, have dinner, watch television, then sleep, wake up in the morning, leave home, go to work, return, and so on.

With my wife [...], I only fulfil my responsibilities, I ask her what she wants and I try to please her. Our relationship is not very cordial, but not very distant either. It is simply [...] normal. It is not about love; it is only understanding. [...] There are two things: one is to accept someone with the heart and the other is to accept someone with logic. Those two things are not the same, and I think that I love my son with my heart, not with logic. Whereas my father, I think, loved me with logic. [...] The name of my son is Abdullah. His grandfather decided his name, I mean, my father-in-law. I think Abdullah appreciates me and loves me. I will always love him. Whatever happens, I will always treat him normally and I do not expect too much from him. Only that he becomes a man. (Interview 2, 11th February 2013, Chandpur)

Mukul is the only one who takes care of the family

Mukul decided to leave the country when I returned from Russia. He is the only one who takes care of the family. He has a deep connection with his father, his brothers, and his sisters. With everyone. He is the only one in the family. Today marked the first anniversary of our father's death, and he called me, whereas my two sisters neither called nor did anything [...] nothing. Mukul sends money, accepts all of us, accepts our circumstances, asks about us, cares for us, not just for me but also for our father, brothers, sisters, relatives [...] and I don't see anyone else who cares as much. [...] When I was studying in Dhaka, I was thinking about finding a job, but as you know, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, finding a good job is very difficult. I was thinking about getting a job for myself and my family. [...] There was an agency that posted an ad saying they were recruiting people for a supermarket in Saudi Arabia. [...] Then they called me for an interview, asked if anyone was interested in going, so... I went there. I spoke with them, had the interview; they needed... they needed – I believe – about forty people, and then they selected me. [...] It wasn't a good salary, but at least it was better than in Bangladesh, so I decided to go. (Interview 2, 11th February 2013, Chandpur)

Some concluding observations

Through the analysis of Hassan's biography and his return migration to Bangladesh, this article highlights the interconnections and interdependencies between the process of the social construction of individual masculinity and family honor, by adopting a biographical approach to the study of transnational family and gender in migration. In particular, the article addresses the increase (or preservation) of family honor and its symbolic resources as a driving force of international migration. If migration constitutes an individual and collective strategy to enhance the symbolic resources and social credentials of the family and its members, its failure likewise leads to the humiliation of the domestic unit as a whole. While Hassan's migration to Russia increased his family's prestige in Bangladesh, his unexpected return compromised its positive image in the public sphere. In order to remedy this shame, Mukul – Hassan's older brother – undertook a new migration to Italy.

Hassan's life story can be read on two levels: at the first level, his individual and family experience; at a deeper level, the collective history encompassing the historical and social dynamics in which he and his family are embedded. At the individual level, his narrative reveals the acceptance of the consequences of his actions and of his failure, which he himself considers a guilt that must be expiated, and a resignation to a life of disillusionment. He emerges as a man disappointed by political struggle, by his circle of friends, by his affective ties, by his marriage, and by his experience as a father. At the same time, Hassan's biography offers a portrait of the historical and social transformations that have affected Bangladesh since independence and of the international relations the country has established with other parts of the world. It also allows one to glimpse the clientelistic and political patronage dynamics that characterise Bangladeshi society, the importance of high cultural capital for middle-class families, and the distinctive – and reproductive – value conferred by a university degree. The volume of such capital determines the position occupied in the marriage market, in the exchange of symbolic capital, and in the system of social credentials, both for the family structure as a whole and for each of its members.

Hassan failed to meet his family's expectations, casting a shadow of humiliation over the entire household. For the family and the community, he became a failure and a fool; and he himself internalises these labels, attributing his downfall to "mental problems" and accepting the social consequences within his family and his surroundings. A failure because he did not achieve his goal of becoming a successful adult middle-class man through migration to Russia and access to a prestigious university. A fool because he has been excluded from the public sphere and his voice lacks citizenship, to the point that he is not even considered a reliable informant for the research.

The impact of this infamy was decisive in shaping a trajectory of social and symbolic humiliation. Indeed, his return migration must be understood as a failure that not only transforms his status from a respected member of the community into a "foreigner in his own land" (Sayad, 1999), but also from a valued subject into a marginalized, unreliable, and subaltern object (Lecadet, 2012).

Mukul's migration, by contrast, appears as an attempt to restore family respectability, recover the image compromised by the younger brother's failure, and defend the honour of the members of the lineage. Mukul's silence regarding the reasons for his migration does not contradict this interpretation; rather,

it reinforces it. Both because his choice is embodied in internalized dispositions – perhaps not entirely conscious – and because naming them would imply reviving the collective humiliation for which Hassan is responsible.

The biography and the success of Mukul's migration are therefore closely linked to the biographical ascent and subsequent academic and migratory failure of his younger brother. At the same time, Hassan's trajectory appears redeemed by Mukul's migratory sacrifice, who acts as an intrafamilial device of redemption. In this way, the intertwining of Hassan's and Mukul's migratory and biographical trajectories demonstrates not only that migration must be understood as a polyphasic displacement across multiple destinations (Della Puppa & King, 2018), but also that this polyphasic character can be observed within a single family and even be enacted by different subjects.

In order to fully understand the social condemnation that fell upon Hassan and Mukul's migratory choice, it is necessary to consider both their gender and their family's social status. Indeed, speaking of gender is indispensable to understanding the social expectations imposed on adult men and the family roles attributed to them in Bangladeshi society. Being an adult man implies assuming a double burden of responsibility: on the one hand, defending one's own honour by safeguarding one's reputation and that of one's relatives, which are inextricably linked; on the other, controlling and disciplining the lives, trajectories, and behaviours of each member of the domestic group.

Thus, individual success and honour intertwine with family success and honour, mutually influencing and reinforcing one another within a system of tactics aimed at increasing the social and symbolic capital of the family group. These trajectories reveal the construction of masculinity within the family, at the intersection of the categories of gender and class.

Adopting this perspective makes it possible to observe the intertwining of Hassan's and Mukul's individual biographical trajectories, as well as the influence they exert on their family's collective biographical trajectory, and to shed light on the links between social dynamics, historical processes, and biographical experiences within the context of an increasing transnationalization of life opportunities and strategies.

Furthermore, in relation to the intensification of these dynamics and the use of the biographical approach at the transnational level, additional reflections emerge. The interview proved to be a site

of confrontation where the brothers' narratives and counternarratives came into conflict. This became perceptible thanks to the adoption of a multisited methodology and the transnational use of the biographical approach. For Hassan, I did not represent the stranger before whom the respectability of the household had to be preserved — as was the case with Mukul and Saiful —, but rather the Simmelian archetype of the stranger (Simmel, 1908), before whom the most surprising and sincere confessions are made.

Hassan made instrumental use of the researcher to give life to narratives that had no place in any other public or private space. The interview thus became the only moment in which these stories could be told and heard, the only space where they could aspire to recognition. But it was also a neutral space, between the public and private dimensions, in which the different voices of Mukul, Saiful, and Hassan — which normally fail to engage in dialogue with one another, at least at this biographical juncture — could finally confront and clash in an imaginary dialogue.

The unexpected way in which Hassan seized that space and brought his account to life — a continuous and resolute narrative flow, without waiting for my questions — reveals, however, that the interview was also his cry of protest and his desperate attempt at rehabilitation: the only moment in which he regained his dignity. Indeed, he passively accepted the label of being the man who, because of “mental problems”, compromised family honour and had to resign himself to a life chosen by his brothers. Yet he wished to reiterate that these were not his decisions nor his choices, partially distancing himself from the image of ineptitude attributed to him. Even so, his protest will remain confined to the researcher's recorder, and the dialogue with his brothers will not come to pass.

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