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Left-Behind Bangladeshi Wives of Muslim Male Migrants in New York: A Critique of Vivek Bald’s *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*

By Prerana Das

**Book title:** *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*  
**Author(s):** Vivek Bald  
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**Abstract**

Vivek Bald wrote *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* to trace the untold story of Muslim Bengali men’s migration from British colonial Bengal throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and integration into the U.S. during the Asian exclusion era. This book review deconstructs gaps around Muslim women’s representation within *Bengali Harlem* through three analytical frameworks: self-orientalization and differential assimilation; masculinities and transnational migration; and the biopolitics of the racialized female body. This review aims to question how patriarchal constructions of Muslim masculinity impact men’s decisions to migrate and establish communities in New York. It explores how transnational masculinities are reinforced and maintained post-migration through kinship networks supported by Muslim women. A close reading reveals how within this overlapping diaspora, the establishment of “Bengali Harlem” indirectly led to inter-ethnic female bonding and community building within racial and gendered limitations. While Bald gives credit to African American, Creole, and Puerto Rican women in building and growing a community, he barely acknowledges the work of the Muslim Bengali wives that migrant men have left behind. This raises questions around the gendered silencing of Muslim Bengali and American women and their invisible labor in establishing a male-dominated migrant network. Using the gaps in Bald’s book as a starting point, this review deconstructs archival narratives from women included in the book. It also incorporates an examination of transnational Muslim masculinities and migrant precarity in relation to Bangladeshi labor, along with the comparative perspective of female migration, to reveal how Bangladeshi male migration to the United States has impacted women’s socio-economic agency, Muslim identity, and gender relations in both the U.S. and rural Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Interracial Migration, Bangladeshi Migration, Muslim Identity, Diaspora, Transnational Masculinity, Female Labor, Migrant Precarity

**Overview**

When discussing *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, Vivek Bald says, “[w]ithout these stories, the history of South Asians in the U.S. is incomplete” (Dizikes). Bald wrote *Bengali Harlem* to trace the previously untold story of Muslim Bengali

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1 Prerana Das is a researcher and documentary filmmaker with a particular interest in stories of migration and processes of displacement in Northeast India and Bangladesh. Her work deals with agrarian development, ethno-nationalism, and the relationship between politicized landscapes and personal memory. Her research revolves around the relationships between protest culture, visual ethnography, political activism, and identity among women tea workers. She can be reached at prerana.das@queensu.ca
men’s migration from British colonial Bengal throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and integration into the U.S. during the Asian exclusion era. A researcher, filmmaker, and professor at MIT’s Comparative Media Lab, Bald references archival records including marriage certificates, ship logs, and census records, to reconstruct a narrative of migration, assimilation, and political awareness over the course of six chapters.

He begins with glimpses into racial immigration and segregation policies in the U.S. and subsequent efforts of activists Mubarek Ali Khan, J. J. Singh, and Ibrahim Choudhry. Amidst this backdrop, a group of Bengali migrant men abandon ship in New Jersey, then eventually settle in areas of the deep South. The next chapters explore their processes of self-orientalization to gain socioeconomic capital within their new communities, marrying African American, Creole, and Puerto Rican women while leaving their Bengali wives overseas. Historical news reports’ orientalist conceptions of these migrants label them as dually “exotic and particular, inscrutable and fanatical, ridiculous and treacherous” (Bald 96). Following accounts of brutal conditions on British steamships, Bald writes about migrants’ political awakening, explored through the case study of Amir Haider Khan, and concludes by examining contemporary cultural impacts of Bengali settlement in New York.

Literature Review

Various researchers have addressed the experiences of the Muslim diaspora in the U.S. (Gerharz and Land 1881; Quraishi 55; Eade et al. 159), along with the ways that Muslim youth negotiate their multicultural identities (Kibria 243; Maira 219; Alam 340). While the experiences of youth and those in the diaspora, particularly after the September 11th attacks, have been well documented and analyzed in relation to racial hierarchies in the U.S., there is a lack of writing around the ways that Bangladeshi Muslim migrants negotiated racial segregation in the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s, in the aftermath of the Jim Crow laws. When academics have written about the history of Bangladeshi migration to the U.S., they have primarily focused on statistical data around remittances, community settlement, and the push and pull factors of migration, including socio-economic mobility (Ahmad 109; Mahmood 531; Rahma and Paik 30).

Scholars including Manish Chalana, Hemant Shah, and Gary Hess have written about South Asian immigration to the U.S. during the Asian exclusion era, along with racist perceptions around the “Hindoo invasion of America” (Chalana 19). Shah traces the complex relationship between racism and citizenship during this period, while Hess explores the struggles that South Asian immigrants faced within the U.S. labor industry. However, all this research tends to focus on South Asian immigration to the West Coast rather than the East Coast. Additionally, while this work highlights the socio-economic aspirations of male migrants, it rarely explores female relationships on either side of the migration process.

In comparison, Bald’s book weaves census data and written records into a unique narrative concerning migration, masculinity, marriage, and community building amidst changing racial hierarchies in New York. The book’s intersectional perspective had previously been missing within the field of cultural history. As a result, since its publication, Bengali Harlem has become a primary source for historians studying Bangladeshi migration to the U.S. during and after the British Raj.

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2 The Jim Crow laws were a widespread set of state and local laws enforcing racial segregation. While much of the analysis of the Jim Crow era focuses on Southern states, the laws were also widely practiced in Northern states, including New York, throughout the twentieth century.
Theoretical Framework and Methodology

*Bengali Harlem* presents several conceptual gaps which can be explored through three analytical frameworks: self-orientalization and differential assimilation; masculinities and transnational migration; and the biopolitics of the racialized female body. Arif Dirlik re-examines Edward Said’s definition of orientalism by suggesting that Asians themselves participated in the construction of the Orient. Dirlik suggests that “self-orientalization” has been established by European orientalists and Asian intellectuals working together and “serves to perpetuate, and even to consolidate, existing forms of power” (Dirlik 114).

In contrast to traditional assimilation, Richard Lewis and Joanne Ford-Robertson frame differential assimilation in relation to Richard Alba and Victor Nee’s concept of segmented assimilation (Alba and Nee 8), a process shaped by immigration. Through this framework, racial and ethnic groups perceived as socially different from the dominant culture encounter more barriers to social integration, while groups perceived as socially similar attain more success in assimilating into the dominant group (Lewis and Ford-Robertson 408). Extending these frameworks to *Bengali Harlem* invokes questions around the ways in which Bangladeshi Muslim migrants were able to adopt various personas using self-orientalization and move through different racial neighborhoods, participating in strategic interracial marriages for socio-economic mobility through differential assimilation.

Research on constructed transnational masculinity and gender relations among Bangladeshi migrants shows that “masculine normativities … become a means for the reproduction of class position” (Ye 1013). Migrant men’s ability to conform to new patriarchal hierarchies in the U.S. by upholding an assimilated, yet heteropatriarchal identity impacts gender social mobility among their families back home. Amrita Pande explores the ways that male migration patterns impact transnational gendered hegemonies and socio-economic agency among women. She discusses the notion of “mobile masculinities,” which are “masculinities encountered and negotiated during the migration process that, in turn, shape migrants’ experiences of mobility” (Pande 384). Pande describes three stages in the migration process during which masculinities are negotiated: the first is in the home country, where male migration is a rite of passage; the second is through interactions in which the migrant is subordinated or questioned, establishing a new racial and gendered hierarchy; and the third is through displays of masculinity or protest in the receiving country. Although Pande focuses on recent migrations, Pande’s framework provides a starting point to explore how Bengali Muslim masculinities were reshaped during the historical development of Bengali Harlem.

Scholars Alyson Callan, Bezon Kumar, Syed Rashid Ali, and Golam Kibria have written about emotional and social impacts on “left-behind” wives of Bangladeshi migrants. Callan explores the ways that a husband’s migration increased the isolation and vulnerability faced by wives who were left behind (Callan 341), while Kumar, Ali, and Kibria deconstruct the impacts of a lack of overseas communication and remittances on the social mobility of “left-behind” wives (Kumar et. al. 174). Using transnational masculinities as a framework highlights its impacts on gender relations within Harlem and Bangladesh.

Ania Loomba suggests that “female bodies symbolise the conquered land” throughout the colonial period and beyond (Loomba 129). This is dually evident in the ways that images of racialized female bodies are sexualized and appropriated throughout colonial discourses and imagery, while physical bodies are utilized, abused, and exploited for labor. Extending this notion to *Bengali Harlem* and postcolonial racialized female bodies, this review questions how women on either side of Bangladeshi migration negotiated their agency as they were utilized and mobilized for invisible labor, socio-economic mobility, and community building.
Self-Orientalization and Differential Assimilation

When deconstructing the building of nation and community in relation to migration, several scholars have used the framework of differential assimilation, in which racial hierarchies within interracial marriage create a race-based caste system, placing darker-skinned individuals in a lower “caste” (Lewis and Ford-Robertson 405). Thus, Bengali Muslim migrants left behind a caste system in India only to integrate into a new one with unfamiliar hierarchies in the U.S. Bald writes about instances in which Bengali men claimed they were not Black or “coloured” (Bald 170), but distinctly Indian. This demonstrates an inherent desire to be recognized as a model migrant above Blackness, contradicting arguments for these men’s cultural openness. Comparatively, Bald includes stories of Black people wearing turbans to gain access to spaces in which “Hindoos” would be allowed to work and travel, but Black people would not due to racial hierarchies, suggesting a reciprocal relationship of racial fluidity between these overlapping diasporas. In a Daily Star interview, Bald somewhat clarifies his views:

[O]ne might say that because they were dark-skinned in the era of segregation, Bengalis could live nowhere else other than Black neighbourhoods…On the idealistic side, one might think that Bengalis…African Americans and Puerto Ricans …recognised common experiences of oppression…My sense is that…people's experiences were somewhere in a spectrum between these two extremes. (Mahtab).

This in-betweenness is a conceptual gap which is interesting to deconstruct in relation to Bengali migrants’ multilayered perceptions of racism. How did these men navigate their own racial biases and potential anti-Blackness, reinforced by both British colonial ideals in India and Jim Crow racial segregation laws in the U.S.? How did this duality in dominant racist ideologies intersect to inform Bengali men’s relationships and cultural identities?

When studying race relations among minorities in the U.S., some scholars reference “deracination” theory, which involves socio-economic, political, and ideological factors working to sever a migrant’s relationships to his or her cultural roots, nation, community, or family (Gahman and Hjalmarson 107). Two possible levels of deracination can be deconstructed in relation to Bengali Harlem. Firstly, Bengali men adopted a homogenized, orientalized version of “Hindoo” identity, abandoning this identity when necessary for social accumulation, economic gain, and mobility within lynching-era America. These migrants were potentially participating in their own deracination by valuing socio-economic gain and assimilation over the preservation of Bengali Muslim culture.

Secondly, social hierarchies within “Bengali Harlem” have arguably influenced the deracination of its mixed-race descendants. Towards the end of the book, Bald includes accounts from descendants which illustrate partial self-participatory deracination and dissociation from Bengali Muslim identity. Since Bengali men often neglected their children, African American, Creole, or Puerto Rican wives from the community would adopt this care role. Subsequently, the second generation aligned more closely with their extended communities, integrating into Puerto Rican and African American New York. Additionally, social myths around Black Muslims during the era of Malcolm X are another gap to potentially tease out within Bald’s narrative, as these might have influenced a dissociation from Muslim identity to align with contemporary social narratives and avoid racist treatment, further impacting this self-participatory deracination among Muslim descendants.
Masculinities and Transnational Migration

When deconstructing Bald’s narrative in relation to masculinities and transnational migrations within the first three chapters, two questions arise. First, how did patriarchal constructions of masculinity impact men’s decisions to migrate and establish communities in Harlem? Second, how were masculinities reinforced and maintained after their migration? The first question can be deconstructed in relation to hegemonic ideals which influence Bengali men to seek work abroad and adopt strategic self-surveilling, compensatory, and often emasculating strategies to evade deportation and to navigate migrant precarity (Charsley 85). In his third chapter, Bald details the racist mistreatment of Bengali seafarers by British steamship captains. Laborers faced uncertainty about work, earned four to six times less wages than British laborers, worked longer hours with physically demanding tasks, had to pay off middlemen or ghat serangs during unemployment periods, and received no compensation for injury or death. Even before abandoning ship, migrants’ masculinities were therefore significantly challenged and bruised. Bald’s exploration of these hierarchical relationships in chapter three raises further questions about their long-lasting impacts on migrants. In what ways did this consistent racist treatment by British captains impact their decisions in community building, marriage, work, and social activities after landing in the U.S.?

The second question can be deconstructed in relation to South Asian conceptions of masculinity in providing for female family members. Bengali migrant men’s frequent choice of younger, teenage African American or Puerto Rican wives in the U.S. suggests an inherent preference for women of childbearing age who have less agency and are easier to control. These women could be utilized to develop kinship networks which would ultimately benefit migrants’ male sons, cousins, and other relatives also hoping to migrate to the United States. In this way, the cycle of male hegemony continues largely due to the invisible labor of women, which leads into a discussion of biopolitics and the female body in relation to the Bengali diaspora.

One of the ways in which hegemonic masculinities are reinforced is through a lack of emotional attachment, nurture, and passion towards female partners (Montes 470). There is no mention of courtship, romance, attraction, or even affection between Bengali migrants and their U.S. wives. Bald writes about Minnie Mollah, an African American woman who married peddler Adbul Rub Mollah. Shortly after their marriage, Abdul filed a Declaration of Intention to naturalize, set up an oriental goods shop, and returned to India. He left Minnie to run the business alone in the predominantly white town of French Lick, Indiana, where she would be othered as a Black woman. Despite any possible affection between Abdul and Minnie, her purpose within the context of “Bengali Harlem” is based on her capital and social worth.

Biopolitics of the Racialized Female Body

While Bald gives credit to African American, Creole, and Puerto Rican women in building and growing the community, he barely acknowledges the work of the Bengali wives that the migrant men have left behind. One story near the beginning of the book demonstrates the trauma, lack of agency, and abandonment these women dealt with while supporting the creation of their husbands’ overseas networks. Jennat Bibi writes to her husband who deserted their family in Hooghly, “leaving her vulnerable to the machinations of his other male relatives…‘unless you come, all of your lands and property will be taken away’” (Bald 90). This letter demonstrates that Jennat and her husband both view claims to property as much more valuable than marital and familial ties, and that masculine hierarchies upheld by male migration frequently render women in the global South socio-economically vulnerable. Women on either side of Bengali Harlem’s migration become tools for migrant men to gain capital and social accumulation abroad and at home.

Bald includes two archival elements within the book itself: photographs between chapters three and four and listings of marriage records within chapter five. The inclusion of
these visual elements reveals further gaps and silences, particularly as there are only three photographs out of seventeen which include women, one of whom is Bengali. They visually represent the invisible significance, yet minimization of women’s labor. The marriage records do not list women’s occupations even though several of them were working, which further highlights the invisibility of their labor. Additionally, Puerto Rican women were often classified as “white” rather than people of color, raising questions about racial politics and hierarchies within interracial marriages. Would marrying a Puerto Rican woman categorized as “white” be more socially and capitally beneficial to a Bengali migrant, particularly when considering their descendants’ racial classification within this new U.S. racial hierarchy?

Near the end, Bald mentions Victoria Echevarria, a migrant from Puerto Rico who married migrant Habib Ullah and played a critical role in establishing the Bengali Garden restaurant. This became one of the cultural hallmarks of the diaspora within New York, marking an achievement in community building. Victoria handled customer service and daily accounts, and “the first face that most customers saw when they entered the restaurant [i.e., Victoria’s] was not Bengali but Puerto Rican” (Bald 177). This shows the prevalence of an overlapping interracial diaspora tied to “Bengali Harlem” in the U.S. consciousness.

Since Bengali men often neglected their children, their descendants spent more time with their mothers’ circles of friends and families, moving through a different gendered set of public spaces. Because of gendered hierarchies within this overlapping diaspora, the establishment of “Bengali Harlem” indirectly led to inter-ethnic female bonding and community building with racial and gendered limitations. These briefly-mentioned female kinship networks present an opportunity to explore the dynamics of interracial female bonding while raising questions about the silencing process. Is there a lack of detail about women’s networks within archival records, or are these exclusions a decision in Bald’s editing process?

Hegemonic ideologies of marriages vary among Bengali men and African American, Creole, or Puerto Rican women, particularly in relation to interracial relationships. South Asian perceptions of interracial marriage and minority identities have developed in response to post-racialist ideologies (Mehgji and Saini 671). Bengali Harlem’s marriage archives raise questions about whether interracial marriages with Puerto Rican women afforded Bangladeshi men more or less social currency than marriages with African American women. Applying Foucault’s notion of biopolitics to cultural hegemonies, several scholars have examined the biopolitical valuation of Black and racialized female bodies, particularly in relation to reproduction (McMahon 749). In “Bengali Harlem,” younger, racialized brides with less autonomy were useful to Bengali male migrants for giving birth to children which would grant their fathers U.S. immigration status. Comparatively, older wives were useful for their economic agency and social networks. In this way, racialized women could be dually utilized for capital and social growth.

The aforementioned left-behind wife Jennat Bibi writes to her husband, “after you come home, we both could go to America” (Bald 90). Extending the previous questions about gendered limitations on migration, it is worth asking how community relationships would develop differently if Bengali women had migrated to the United States and married African American, Creole, or Puerto Rican men. How would racial and gendered hierarchies intersect within interracial marriages? Would mixed-race descendants align more with their mother’s or father’s culture in this scenario? In this way, the silences and gaps within Bengali Harlem provoke one to deconstruct the limitations of male migration and its hierarchies.

**Conclusion**

Bald is collaborating with Alaudin Ullah to produce In Search of Bengali Harlem, a documentary film which delves deeper into the book’s narratives. These multidisciplinary efforts relate to his central thesis of preserving and reconstructing previously forgotten stories.
of working-class Bengali Muslim male migration to America and bringing these stories into the Western consciousness. Several themes throughout the book support this aim. Bald suggests that the case study of “Bengali Harlem” provides an unprecedented example of cultural acceptance and integration among marginalized communities, which presents future possibilities of similar acceptance and integration among overlapping diasporas. He highlights resilience and rebellion in maintaining kinship networks overseas despite persistent migrant precarity and threats of deportation. Lastly, he emphasizes the importance of kinship networks in helping Bengali migrants settle, find work, and integrate into American communities.

*Bengali Harlem* provides a useful starting point to consider the potential of preserving, restoring, or reconstructing forgotten and silenced histories from South Asia. It raises more questions than it answers, however, in regard to Bengali and American women’s roles in establishing a male-dominated migrant network. Due to its narrative structure, this book caters to a general audience hoping to learn more about the history of Bangladeshi migration or the cultural development of Harlem, New York through an interracial lens. On a more critical level, *Bengali Harlem* is most useful in pointing to a gap in research about hegemonies within interracial family and community structures, and how the biopolitics of the racialized female body can be negotiated among model minorities, interracial families, and marginalized communities.

References


