

“Food, Identity and Symbolic Metaphors in the Bengali South Asian- Canadian  
Community”

by

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### **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## **Abstract**

Migration is a process that allows people to circulate from one place to another as they seek resources and search for new beginnings. The study of the South-Asian Bengali community in Canada, conducted in Southern Ontario show how women of first, second and third generation have adapted, resisted and acculturated with the Canadian mainstream. The purpose of this research is to convey the intricate connections between food and identity in the lives of Bangladeshi-Canadian women between 19-25 who call Canada their home, using participant observations and semi-structured interviewing. Food is a marker of ethnic identity in a globalized, migrant community; cultural and social issues governing the consumption of food products serve as a marker of regional, national and gender identity. In the Bengali diaspora, food is a symbol of tradition and a link to ethnic identity as younger generations of South Asian-Canadian women maintain, conserve or oppose traditional values, while engaging in identity construction. The research asks if rituals surrounding food practices still retain a traditional meaning and fulfil the same expectations or if the experiences of acculturation and immersion into mainstream Canadian society transformed the conceptions of food, gender and ethnicity construction amongst contemporary Bengali South-Asian Canadians. It will furthermore explore gendered ideologies regarding food, its consumption and transmission of social values. In the end, food and gender provide a lens through which identity construction in the diaspora is revealed.

Keywords: Food, Gender, Identity, Bengali, Bangladeshi, South Asian

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## **Introduction to the Community**

Food as subject matter is diverse. Food and identity are linked together through bonds of ethnicity and culture, though the connections may not always be evident. But that is not all that connects food and identity. They can be interchangeable for one another as one cannot exist without the other to define it. This is especially true as food may not only define 'who' we are, which reflects our identity, but also, where we come from. The purpose of this research is to show how food and identity share a close relationship through the lens of first, second and third generation Bangladeshi-Canadian women who now call Canada their home. In traditional Bengali conceptualization, food and all the structures, metaphors and symbols surrounding it are deeply rooted in cultural identity and nationality. Practices surrounding food, the notions of proper food, practices of food preparation and serving, etiquette, gender and social hierarchy are all aspects that help shape Bengali-Canadian women's identity. Whether that identity is ethnic or cultural, a large part of it is drawn from one's ties to cultural heritage- food and language. Without food to serve as a marker of identity and without language and societal customs which govern that behaviour as uniquely 'Bengali,' these Canadian women would find it hard to relate to themselves and others as Bengali.

Questions surrounding identity-nationality, family dynamics, mother-daughter and daughter-in-law relationships, career/education, gender dynamics, cooking, diet, body image, aesthetics/beauty, dating/marriage, religious festivals, religion and transgressions (especially for example, in relation to marriage, religious choice, dating) , language, and gender identity emerge as recurring themes as women who participated in the research engage in discussions about them. All of these topics are tied to food,

which conversely also ties them to identity. As these 19 to 25 year-old Bengali-Canadian women try to negotiate, understand and define the boundaries of their identities, they question the social and cultural hierarchies that are reproduced through structures of food and why these structures are needed to define their identity as 'Bengali women.'

Part of what attracted me to conduct research about Bengali-Canadian women is my own origin as a first generation Bengali-Canadian woman. As I face various forms of cultural assimilation, adaptation and acculturation processes, I am engaged in negotiating my own identity within the Bengali-Canadian community. Yet, there is a lack of resources, writings and academic sources that discuss the feelings of Bengali immigrant identity-making. Academic literature tells us very little about Bengali women and how they define their ties to their country of origin, or ancestral country. Does this mean that Bengali women do not wish to talk about themselves or their lives? Or does it mean that they are not educated enough to write about it themselves? Or, is it simply that less than adequate research has been conducted on this particular North American ethnic community? While there are a large number of resources that can be found about other South-Asian communities, certainly large relative to what is available about Bengalis, there is hardly anything in the literature about the life, social customs, habits, attitudes, behaviours of the Bengali-Canadian. What's more, the target of research is Bangladeshi-Canadians should not be confused with West-Bengal (or Northern Indian) Bengali-Canadians. My desire to study both Muslim and Hindu women was based on my interest in the religious divide that exists in Bangladesh. The majority of Bangladeshi are Muslim, with Hindus forming the next largest denomination.

According to Bangla2000, about 80 percent of Bangladeshis are Muslims, making them the largest religious group in the country (Bangla2000, n.d.).

This research was designed with the aim that it would provide the opportunity for regular, average, everyday Bengali women to have a voice and talk about issues that matter to them. Though the research was designed with a framework of food and identity, it was structured with enough fluidity that participants could engage in conversation about other topics as well. This is evidenced in the broad category of themes that were generated by the study. Though I focus much of my attention on food related themes, not all are directly related to food, including aesthetics (beauty, body image and dieting), marriage, dating, religion and much more.

In my opinion, this research shows that food and identity are ultimately cultural metaphors that help to enforce ideas about traditional customs, ideologies, behaviours, values and attitudes. Whether these traditional structures concern gendered philosophies and behaviour, religious ideologies, issues of marriage and dating or something else, the notion of food and identity allow these ideas and customs expression. Food and identity are then interchangeable because it becomes another way of addressing more complex issues like belonging, gender, class, ethnicity, cultural values and group dynamics. It is through food and identities that these structures are reproduced, whether the generations choose to pass them onwards to the future or decide to abandon these traditional ways of life; they serve a guideline for Bengali-Canadian women trying to find themselves and forge an identity of their own.

The words 'tradition' and 'traditional' are being used in this introduction, and the reader will find it through the paper as well. As I use the term tradition to talk about the 'traditional' way of life or customs, behaviours and ideologies that are considered 'traditional,' I acknowledge that it is a highly contested term in the social sciences. However, the use of the term is necessary as my informants use the term to understand their own experiences. They juxtapose tradition with modern to understand the changes that have happened and are happening in their culture. Therefore, these terms are not used as analytical terms, but are in place to reflect my informants' everyday language use. So, for the purpose of this paper, the term tradition or traditional refers to my informants' understanding of the 'conventional' or usual way of life as told by their parents or grandparents in context to the contemporary way of life

### Research Topic and Questions

Food is a marker of ethnic identity. In a globalized, migrant community cultural and social issues governing the consumption of food products serve as a marker of regional, national and geographic identity. The ritualization of food and its symbolic structures are shaped by notions about proper foodstuffs, food preparation and service, social hierarchy, etiquette and gendered philosophies in South Asia. In the South Asian-Canadian community, food serves as a symbol of tradition and a link to ethnic identity as younger generations of South Asian-Canadians participate in the ritual processes that maintain and conserve traditional values and identity. However, generational divides and immersion in mainstream Canada introduce issues of acculturation and changing patterns within the South Asian community, impacting,

transforming and re-negotiating notions of 'proper food.' Since South Asia is a broad region, for the purposes of this research, focus will be on Bengali South Asian Canadians who originated from Northern India and Bangladesh.

In the initial stages of my research, I set out to learn if rituals surrounding food practices still retain a traditional, ritualized meaning and fulfil the same expectations or if the experiences of acculturation and immersion into mainstream Canadian society have transformed the conceptions of food and ethnicity amongst contemporary Bengali South Asian Canadians. I thought to accomplish this goal by asking how contemporary Bengali-Canadians construct their ethnic and national identities in a multicultural, multiethnic, globalized community. Differences in identity (South Asian and Canadian) were examined in order to understand how younger generations of South Asian Canadians negotiate their identities: are they South Asian, Canadian or some combination of each? In the beginning, I believed that the generational divide among first, second and third generation women would be significant in determining identity because I assumed that the link to one's native country is more likely to decrease through the generations. I also explored gendered ideologies especially with respect to what is regarded as women's intrinsic link to food: its preparation and consumption and the role it plays in the transmission of social values.

The study was conducted amongst young adult women who are Bengali-Canadians between the ages of 19-25 years of age ranging from first to third generation immigrants. They or their families are from either Northern India or Bangladesh. Due to

the fact that religious beliefs of Hinduism and Islam influence social structure and values, I also examined the complexity of food proscriptions based on religious differences. These research questions raise concerns about identity construction which is becoming an increasingly complex phenomenon in a trans-national Canada where individuals negotiate complex relationships to their ethnic and cultural identities.

### Literature Review and Theoretical Orientation

The literature review of food and identity discloses that the reproduction of gender, social and cultural structures in this immigrant community is symbolic in maintaining a link to the “native land.” Vallianatos & Raine have conducted a study with an Arabic speaking community of South Asian women that have undergone dietary adaptation and have incorporated foreign food with their traditional diet in *Consuming Food and Constructing Identities among Arabic and South Asian Immigrant Women* (2008: 359). Similarly, Turgeon and Pastinelli have explored the issue of food categories by looking at the ethnic categories of food through the diverse ethnic cuisines available in Quebec City. *Eat the World: Postcolonial Encounters in Quebec City's Ethnic Restaurants* discusses the incorporation of the “exotic” as part of “Canadian Cuisine” (2002: 260-264). Murcott's *Cooking and the Cooked: A Note on the Domestic Preparation of Meals* as well as *The Sociology of Food and Eating: Essays on the Sociological Significance of Food* (1985) and Padolsky's *You are What You Eat: Ethnicity, Food and Cross-Cultural Spaces* (2005) focus on women and the importance of women's contribution to maintaining the traditional structures as well as women's diet in comparison to men's diet. Though the authors stated above did not conduct their

research among Bengali Americans or Canadians, they are not entirely inexperienced. The literature of food and ethnicity are useful, especially since there is not a large literature on Bengali or Bangladeshi populations when it comes to the social customs and attitudes surrounding food. So, looking at other ethnic groups who see food consumption and preparation as integral to the social dynamic provides a comparative literature.

Ray's *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali American Households* (2004), and Counihan and Van Esterik's *Food and Culture: A Reader* (2008) have produced contemporary material on ethnic cuisine and gendered structures that are promising to this research, as they focus on the reproduction of traditional structures within the context of migration, relocation, globalization and modernization. Counihan has also written *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power* which shows food from an anthropological perspective, using the lens of gender and empowerment. This is a useful material for the study as the research contained all female participants. Ray's work is particularly important in this context as he has written the most current ethnographic material available on Bengalis in North America. Although he presents data about Bengali Americans rather than Bengali-Canadians, the wide array of ethnographic material he provides along with his emphasis on symbolic reproduction on structures make it a very good source of information. Fieldhouse's *Food and Nutrition: Customs and Culture* (1995) studies food in relation to cultural customs. This helps educate the reader on the role of nutrition; how food ideologies may breed racism and ethnocentrism; about different cuisines, methods of meal preparation, and etiquette; the cultural norms and social functions of food and gender, religion,

morals and ethics; and ‘taste,’. An investigation of food in popular culture through the work of Parasecoli's *Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture* (2008) provides an overview of the relationship between food and identity politics. This work discusses how tourism and the technological advancements of science have also changed the consumption and performance of food. Fieldhouse, and Parasecoli talk about food in a contemporary context, introducing issues of social regulation of food customs, taste and identity which are topics that come up during the course of research. This literature helped me construct my questionnaire for the semi-structured interview, as it made me aware of identity, gender and taste as relevant topics.

*Food and Culture* by Counihan and Van Esterik (2008) introduces theories of food consumption, changing habits and contemporary issues surrounding food with reference to works of leading theorists in the field like Margaret Mead, Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, Marvin Harris, Michel de Certeau and Luce Guadagnoli, showing the basis and development of modern theories of food structures. *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism* is another essential reader in this field produced by Morton (2004). This reader addresses the importance of ‘taste,’ exploring the relationship between the consumer and consumption by looking at identity performance in this dyadic relationship. Nordmeyer's *The Taste Culture Reader* (2007) also begins with an introduction to the study of taste and culture. In particular, he details the intricate relationship that is shared between the two to produce culinary themes and habits. Jack Goody (2007) gives an overall history of culinary cultures and their development while Pierre Bourdieu (2007) emphasizes the importance of acquired behaviour or ‘taste’ in the production and maintenance of social class. The works in the

readers broadened my knowledge in the variety of theories that are present in the food literature concerning 'taste' and etiquette. Knowing these theories allowed me to frame the questions that I asked to my respondents when talking about flavour, likes and dislikes. David Sutton's *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (2007) addresses memory and the taste of home which is an area of food studies that has gained increasing popularity for understanding adaptation and acculturation in the context of migration, especially in deciphering why certain rituals manage to exist while other seemingly important rituals surrounding eating etiquette disappear during the adaptive process. In terms of research, it helped me realize that notions of food customs will evolve from one generation to next among Bangladeshi Canadian families as the distance to the 'native' land will increase, impacting the retention of customs. Finally, the work of Lupton in (2007) analyzes the relationship between food and emotion that examines structural reproduction and the transmission of values and identity within cultural dynamics from one generation to the next. This expands on the concepts the same notions that are present in Sutton's work, except that it also includes values and identities along with food customs and migration.

Though gender has been integrated in the literature review above, a deeper exploration of gender through Westwood and Bhachu's *Enterprising Women: Ethnicity, Economy, and Gender Relations* (1988), Sweetman's *Gender and Migration* (1998) Inness's *Cooking Lessons: The Politics of Gender and Food* (2001) and Leeds-Hurwitz's *From Generation to Generation: Maintaining Cultural Identity over Time* (2006) shows the progression and change in attitudes, gender ideologies and the changing dynamics in relationship to cooking, 'mothering,' maintaining cultural identity and the socialization

of daughters. Both works address immigrant women and the relationship between a working wife and a working mother by investigating how class, economic opportunities, and job availability affect traditional patriarchal structures, hierarchy, income etc, noting new trends for gender behaviour in immigrant communities. Each book contributes a wide range of articles by various authors writing over a decade and therefore, illustrates the struggles that have been overcome for successful change and those that continue to be negotiated. Gender is a prevalent topic as women are the informants of this research, and issues of gender dynamics, division of labour within households and notions of mothering are all part of the narratives.

The work of Mennell, Murcott and Otterloo in *The Sociology of Food: Eating, Diet and Culture* (1992) addresses the relationship between eating, diet and culture, which becomes important in my investigation of the relationship of women and body imaging in North America especially when that work is compared to the research on food consumption and eating habits. Since women are the mediators of food and social values, patterns of food consumption have been impacted by dieting and the development of new food technology, changing how women experience their body and cooking in the age of technology. Dieting, nutrition and body image are topics of conversation in the semi-structured interviews.

Research in this category has also been conducted by Counihan (1999) who has furthered the discussion of food and gender through the anthropology of the 'body'. This work examines dieting, the female body, reproduction, sexuality and their determinant position in ensuring women's ties to food and culture. While Inness (2001)

investigates appropriate gender behaviour, expectations and culture in gender politics, Leeds-Hurwitz (2006) looks at maintaining cultural identity over time and the integral role of women in reproducing social, cultural and ethnic values through heritage communication, language, religion and food. Identity politics, kinship work and cultural maintenance have been delegated to women as the gatekeepers of socialization. These works focus on 'mothering' and cultural attitudes towards mothering, presenting trends in behaviour, though they do not necessarily deal with issues related to the acceptance/rejection of cultural values.

Due to my own Bengali-Canadian ancestry, I felt it was pertinent to explore the literature of interpretive anthropology as objectivity; reflexivity and the method of conducting research are essential to the success of this endeavour and might be affected by the researcher's own background. The early inspiration and example is Barbara Myerhoff who studied the Jewish population of Israel Levin Senior Centre. Myerhoff manages to successfully research her informants' understanding of Judaism to interrogate her own. There are also contemporary examples by Ray (2004) and Panourgiá (2008) who are anthropologists studying peoples of their own ancestry and producing texts relevant to contemporary anthropology.

I would also like to address the process of conducting research and writing. Fabians' *Anthropology with an Attitude: Critical Essays* (2001) is a collection of essays that talk about the production of knowledge, ethnographic objectivity, misunderstanding context, utilizing examples from work done in the field that stipulate a rough guideline of dos and don'ts in the field for a new researcher. Clair's *Expressions of Ethnography*

(2003) provides an array of critical essays by various authors. The section on ethnographic perspectives outlining the meanings and symbols for conducting interpretive ethnographic and a separate ethics for Post-colonial ethnography by Goodall Jr.'s *What is Interpretive Anthropology? An Eclectic Tale* (2003) and Gonzalez's *An Ethics for Post-Colonial Ethnography* (2003) is thought provoking because it addresses the topic of migration following post colonial experience, which is relevant as Bangladesh was part of the land colonized first by the British Empire, and then by Pakistan. Similarly, the last section of the book on genealogy and post-colonial identity which addresses ethnicity, ethnic identity, dislocation and the issue of homeland are directly relevant to the research being undertaken here as the participants as well as I have been engaging in identity construction and understanding migration. Sanford and Angel-Ajani's *Engaged Observer: Anthropology, Advocacy, and Activism* (2006) and Panourgiá and Marcus' *Ethnographic Moralia: Experiments in Interpretive Anthropology* (2008) also concentrate on the issue of conducting interpretive ethnographic observation, power relations, perspectives, identities in-flux and other issues that are imperative in conducting good research. I understand that the underlying values, structures and notions of identity are transformative processes; that changing and adapting to the mainstream population also transforms the notions of pre-existing Bengali identity to incorporate new ideals, values and beliefs. This redefinition of identity through the performances of food related practices reflect the changing patterns of the Bengali South Asian Canadian community.

I use the word identity repeatedly, so it is pertinent to provide a description of identity that I am operating with. The word identity is being used here as a descriptor

for cultural and social identity which makes an individual distinct from others. An individual may express their identity through language, food, dress and behaviour. Identity, especially ethnic identity fosters a sense of self and belonging to a collective group through biological ancestry and characteristics. Though there are markers of identity, it is an abstract concept.

The one problem I encountered while I was conducting this literature review was that there was a lack of material concerning Bangladeshi-Canadian and Bangladeshi-American populations. With the exception of Ray's *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali American Households* (2004), there were very few articles about South Asians and the focus of these was Indian, Pakistani and Tamil groups. This leaves a wide slot where nothing is being said about Bengalis. While there were numerous works on Bangladeshis, they were about proper nutrition and diet (mostly from rural and village studies) as well as economics, family planning and nutrition. What of Bengali-Canadians, Bengali Americans and all the other Bengali populations in the United Kingdom? I could not track down sources about gender structures, food practices and etiquette, social customs, the gendered division of labour and so much more. What relevant information is present is from Ray and other anthropologists who have studied food, social customs and practices in immigrant communities in other parts of the world or in North America. This lack of available material and literature needs to be addressed so that information is available to future anthropologists and students in anthropology that would want to study this ethnic group. Bengali-Canadians make up a significant portion of Ontario's population, and they are largely distributed across Canada. Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver are big centres where Bengali-Canadians

have their own markets, grocery stores, bakeries, music stores and much more. This I state from my personal experience as a Bengali woman who is aware of the food and shopping centres that are talked about in the community. The inability to have access to data- qualitative or quantitative- hampered the research process greatly. This thesis is heavily reliant on the research work that was conducted through semi-structured interviews and participant observations among Bengali women between 19-25 and Bengali households both Hindu and Muslim during Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Adha, Durga Puja and Diwali.

Before we progress any further, I would like to explain the Islamic and Hindu religious festivals that I have mentioned to clarify what they are since my participant observation involved them. There are some continuous themes that are present in these events, despite the difference in religious beliefs. There is a significant focus on gender dynamics and the tasks that are delegated to women and men during these events. Another important part of celebrating these festivals is the element of timing. Timing plays a large role because there are specific times of prayer, followed by specific times of food consumption. Also, food preparation (which ties in with gender division of tasks) and its presentation are crucial to the events, because the food served has to be deemed of appropriate quality. To serve food to guests during this event that is not the 'standard' of food expected, is to demean oneself and to lose honour. Since these are big religious events that are celebrated with family units, it usually means that it is the honour of the family that is at stake. To make it easier to relate the events to the themes that have been mentioned above, they will be grouped together according to religion.

Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha are the two major Islamic celebratory events in the Islamic calendar, which is based on moon cycles. Eid-ul-Fitr is always celebrated after the holy month of Ramadan that observes fasting, praying and repentance of sins to mark an occasion for joy and sharing between all Muslims. Eid-ul-Adha is celebrated after the month of pilgrimage or Hadh where devout Muslims go to Mecca (one of the cities of origin of the faith) and is also focused on sharing and giving. Eid-ul-Adha, also called the 'Bokri Eid' in Bangladesh shows the importance of sacrifice. This event is emphasized with a special ritual sacrifice of animals (usually cows, goat and sheep) done in a specific way, and the meat is shared with relatives, neighbours and the poor. The premise of both events is sharing, solidarity and uniting of all Muslim brothers and sisters in the religion through generosity. These are basic descriptions of the events. Now, it is clear from the summary provided that Eid-ul-Adha is largely centred on the consumption and distribution of food due to the fact that it is always celebrated with a sacrifice by Muslims. However, despite the fact that Eid-ul-Fitr is celebrated after the month of fast and prayers, it is also food centric and many delicacies, sweets, shahi foods (or foods as believed to have been consumed by the shahs, emperors) are cooked to mark the end of the purging fast.

Durga Puja and Diwali are Hindu celebrations. Durga Puja which is essentially the worship of the goddess Durga from Hinduism is one of the largest celebrated pujas. There are six special days that are observed for the celebration of Ma-Durga. The dates are set according to a traditional Hindu calendar that observes the celebration of the Goddess Durga. The entire event (amongst Bangladeshi Hindus) spans a fortnight and different aspects of Durga are revered and worshipped in the days of the Puja. In

Bangladesh and among Bangladeshi Hindus residing in Canada, it is a major festival and a very significant cultural event. It is usually held within the month of Kartik in the Bengali calendar which roughly corresponds to the period between September and October. The puja shows the various stages of Durga's reigns, and enacts her prowess from the Mahabharata, ending with the casting of the idol into the water with a procession that invites her to come again the next year for the Durga puja ceremony. Pujas in Hinduism utilize idols made in the image of the gods and goddesses for worshipping purposes, and this ceremony has elaborate idols, each showing different aspects of Durga and the stages of her reign. Puja Mandaps are set all over to give people a place to worship.

Diwali or the festival of lights happens in mid-October or mid-November and usually spans about five days. It is a prominent festival celebrated by the Hindus and is noted for its ties to the Ramayana Mahabharata as it is a celebration of good triumphing over evil. It is an aesthetically pleasing event with its multitudes of candles, deeps and other forms of lights that are arranged in patterns and rows to represent lightness over dark. Bengalis celebrate Diwali as part of Kali Puja. They use the lamps, candles and the deeps in memory of departed souls and beloved family members and relatives who have passed away. They worship the goddess Kali, and hope that as the goddess of time, she will help their ancestors re-incarnate and walk the earth again.

Other versions of Diwali are celebrated worldwide. One that is better known in North America and United Kingdom is Guy Fawkes Night, which coincides with Diwali, happening around the beginning of November. Guy Fawkes Night, which is a

British holiday, was presumably picked up in India during the British Raj because it coincided with Diwali. It was celebrated with fireworks.

There is more elaboration on Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Adha, Durga Puja and Diwali in the sections following where data from the participant observation is analyzed.

### Assumptions made and Expected Result

As I moved forward with my research, I assumed that the data I collected would reflect the complexities of food related practices. I expected I would be able to show how the process of preparing and consuming food – as shared experiences -- bring people together and unite them. I anticipated the data would be diverse as the sample population would consist of first, second and third generation women with different religious backgrounds, food proscriptions, familial, and regional values.

I expected the study would reveal the nuances of food related issues such as proscriptions based on religion, food taboos based on religious preference, personal preference with ‘taste’, diet and nutritional structures, the importance of language; as well as different notions and perceptions of food and identity based on ancestral origins. The objective was not to make broad generalizations but to analyze the complex structure of ethnic identities and the various processes of identity construction that Bengali-Canadians engage in. I expected to find out about the ways in which Bengali-Canadian women negotiate their cultural and ethnic identity and/or maintain their cultural identities while facing the processes of acculturation, transformation, and the

inclusion/exclusion of group members. I also expected to reveal how food is intricately connected and crucial to the process of identity formation.

### Methodology and Techniques Used for Data Collection

For the purpose of this thesis and due to time limitations, I decided to investigate the issue from the perspective of women. All women selected for the study were between the ages of 19-25, placing them in the 'young adults' to 'official adults' category. As the city of Kitchener-Waterloo is host to two Universities as well as a College, the selection of age was originally dependent on finding participants who are attending academic institutions or recent graduates who have decided to make the city their permanent home. Participants were recruited through the use of fliers that advertised the topic of my research, through networking sites such as Facebook and the South Asian Bengali community of the Kitchener-Waterloo region. Participants were chosen with the criteria that they were of Bengali descent, identified as first, second and third generation Bengali women willing to talk about the research topic and qualified in the chosen age category. Though the original assumption was to recruit participants from the Kitchener-Waterloo area alone, it expanded to include volunteers from the Greater Toronto Area as well. There were seventeen women in total, nine of them were first generation, five of them were second generation and three of them were third generation. Thirteen of the women were Muslim, three were Hindu and one identified herself as Hindu and Pagan. By Pagan, she means North American Neo-Paganism.

The method for gathering information included both participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation was conducted during religious festivals that are celebrated by Bengali Hindus as well as Muslims, mainly Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Azha, Durga Puja and Diwali. Participation in the project also included a 40 minute semi-structured interview. Though there were a few set questions prepared for each interview, much of the interview allowed for 'impromptu' topics or followed the topic of conversation introduced by the participant. All participants met me at a public location of their choice, which was usually a shopping mall or a coffee or tea shop where the interview session was held. Though the interviews varied in length, they all ended within the 40 minute time slot.

All qualitative data gathered during the research process from participant observations and interviews underwent inductive and deductive coding methods because the methodology is hermeneutic or interpretive. The inductive coding process involved organizing data according to repeating themes and concerns. First, the raw data was gathered from the interviews and participant observations and condensed into short summaries. Then, once the summaries were analyzed, clear links and repeating themes or motifs were isolated. Then, the data were studied for the themes using a set of procedures that allowed for comparisons between first, second and third generation Bengali women. Deductive coding was used to analyze the content or text from the raw data, so that it could be organized according to relevancy. This form of coding was used in order to see how many times a topic was raised, with what intensity or to compare how people felt about a certain topic. However, since these revealed really broad spectra, after some initial comparisons, content analysis was used for the interviewing

process while data from direct and participant observations underwent structuring through mental maps, which are similar to flow charts. The development of these mental maps involved a close study of the text with a detailed focus on the terminologies used by the participants. Furthermore, the data gathered from the interviews and the data gathered from the participant observations was compared to see what commonalities or differences occurred. This type of analysis also helped organize the data around a number of themes, allowing for the identification of differences and for comparisons between and among first, second and third generation participants.

Grounded analysis is a method of qualitative data analysis where interview transcripts are identified by themes or categories which are compared, linked together and related to each other to find meaning and to better understand the content (Bernard, 1998: 607-611). Pile sorts categorize the data and allow for paired comparisons to compare and contrast between the data (Bernard, 1998: 390). Both forms of coding were essential to the success of the project as they helped to organize and arrange the data. The thematic motifs/issues and textual analysis together provided a method of triangulation, that tested the accuracy and similarity of the results in a methodical way. A wide array of methodology was used to approach the data; however, ultimately, all of the methods relied on my observations and interpretations. Using pile sorting allowed generational comparison in the data from first to third generations in terms of ratios and percentages. This helps to show the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the research. Furthermore, the use of Grounded Analysis helped log the frequency with which the themes appeared from first generation to third.

## **Preliminary Data Analysis**

Experiences surrounding food are versatile. Just as food can bring families and individuals together, connecting through bonds of solidarity, kinship, love, commitment, cultural values, social rules, and just as it can have a unifying effect, it can also do the opposite. While it connects people and families, it can also separate and divide. Eating the right type of food and knowing the proper etiquette and social norms are important as they have lasting impacts on the relationships. Ultimately, food is about making relationships. Whether it allows people to maintain an already existing relationship or helps to establish new relationships- it may cause people to live harmoniously or to fight viciously- it is about interaction. In this context, the social norms, values, ideologies, beliefs and ways of behaving are all tied to food. Teaching the next generation how to cook and the very act of cooking, allows the cook to transmit her community's social and cultural values. Cooking is never just about cooking. And since the cooks in a South-Asian Bengali family are primarily mothers, this is largely about mother-daughter relationships as well as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships, and conversely mother, daughter and daughter in law relationships. This forms a triangular pattern and presents us with areas of generational contention between the mother and daughter or daughter in law. To take it a step further, if a grandmother or grandmother-in-law is introduced to this process, then, the generational gap becomes more pronounced as values, beliefs, ideologies and etiquette do not stay stagnant. But, the changes that happen between one generation to the next, especially when it meets with the disapproval of the elders, cause friction, and create conflict in day to day interactions. These conflicts are often experienced through acts of food preparation, consumption and

division of kitchen and household chores, as female family members may choose to uphold the norms or rebel against it.

Participant observation and semi-structured interviews disproved assumptions that I made in the beginning of the research process. I assumed that food would serve as a connection that would link people together in social solidarity; that it would serve as a bridge between old world customs and the Bengali-Canadian community. However, even the merest glance through the interview sets and the participant observation summaries reveals that the data is diverse. Also, the assumption that the cultural foods would be more prominent in first generation migrants, and decrease in practice and importance as one proceeded to second and then the third was not an accurate prediction for this particular data set. Examples from the interviews where first generation women are rebelling against the norm of cooking, home-making and gender divisive chores show that they are not upholding the traditional practices of food making and preparation. Yet, there are examples of second generation women that are avid cooks, some of whom speak the native language of Bangla and others who do not. How one experiences one's culture or performs identity varies despite social conditioning, rigidly structured norms and shared values. That is not to say that the norms, values and beliefs do not have an impact on the individual's life, positive or negative- just that it is not the only thing that informed the decisions made by these Bengali-Canadian women. A great example of that are two third generation women in the data set, who have overturned core social values, customs, beliefs and norms that were included in their conditioning as part of being a 'Bengali' when one of them chose to identify as a transgendered woman and another decided to change her religion from Islam to Hinduism and adopt

vegetarianism as part of her religious practices. These transgressive examples show that despite a very strong traditional upbringing, people chose to perform their identity differently, sometimes transgressing against the allocated norms, even at the risk of being denounced by community and family members.

An important theme that emerges through the interviews and participant observation as well is the consideration of diet and women's anxiety and belief that traditional diets are fattening and not as healthy as readily available consumer products.. Grocery stores in Canada sport a large selection of 'regular' and 'diet' foods, leaving shoppers to choose from a wide array and select products that they wish to consume. Traditional foods on the other hand come with recipes, and though individuals can try to modify the recipe to a 'diet friendly' recipe, it is usually not without altering the taste of the food completely, and it sometimes takes away the richness of the heritage behind it. For instance, using ghee (also known as clarified butter) in preparation of foods for Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Adha and other special occasions also marks the importance of the celebration as ghee was initially a product that only the rich could afford. At first, recipes involving ghee were used for special events to mark its difference from daily food. Nowadays, it is an affordable product that can be consumed at any time. When cooking for guests, it is usually utilized. Not using it takes away the taste and texture that it contributes as well as the interwoven history that it shares with Bengali food. But alas, ghee is fattening. Similarly, the use of oils or fried food that is present in Bengali cooking is also something that many women (first, second and third generation) view as being extremely unhealthy. The traditional diet has fats and oils that distinguish it from

the Canadian foods that are available in stores. The argument can easily be made that they are lifestyle choices.

Aesthetics and beauty are largely related to dieting and keeping fit.. Issues of aesthetics and beauty become prominent when we consider the media's representation of a particular image, whether it be from Bollywood or Hollywood. These issues become particularly pertinent when topics of dating, mate selection and marriage enter the picture as the women want to be as close to the physical ideal as they can be in order to improve their chances of marriage, capturing the 'right' man and establishing a good life with (of course) an appropriate man (i.e., a man that the family will approve of). This is not to say that there are not those who marry without their parent's approval, just that dieting, aesthetics and beauty are concerns that are commonplace among women in the Bengali-Canadian community.

## **Food and Social Solidarity**

Food serves as a dominant symbol in Bengali culture encouraging the literal embodiment of its roots, cultural heritage and most of all, the traditions, the rules and regulations that are part of Bengali society. Rules vary depending on the class, educational background, caste (in case of Hinduism) and religion as these are the primary factors that influence the construction of the 'traditional' rules which are followed as guidelines of how-to-be Bengali. Bangladeshi identity is largely derived from national pride (in the case of Bangladesh it is reverential to the movement of Independence and the establishment of National Language Day), and on its difference from the North American way of life. Food and language are interconnected. Therefore, performing language and performing food are both ways of performing Bengali identity.

In order to better understand the rituals surrounding food, participant observation was conducted during religious and cultural festivals when food was important. As mentioned earlier, the interviews and the participant observation conducted included both Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims of Bangladeshi origin who now reside in Canada. So, the rituals that were focused on were Eid-ul-Fitre, Eid-ul-Adha, Durga Puja and Diwali.

Performances of these four religious events are based largely on the food. So, how is this food -- which serves as a uniting factor between the Muslims that are partaking in this event -- prepared and consumed? For Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha, men are in charge of procuring the proper food items. In the case of Eid-ul-Adha, it is the men that pick out the best animals from the market for sacrifice, considering build,

strength, age, size etc to find the one that is suitable within the price that they have set aside for it. In Eid-ul-Fitr, it is once again the men that go to the markets. This time they are not buying live animals like cows or goats, but getting the freshest meat possible and possibly buying live chickens to be skinned and cut in the market to bring home for Eid preparations. If men are shopping, that is going out to the markets to buy the meats, grains, vegetables or other products needed for the events, then what are the women doing? The answer is simple: cooking. The women are in charge of turning the raw food products into tasty morsels for consumption. The kitchen is the domain of the women during these events, usually with a grandmother or a mother-in-law as the supervisor over daughters and daughters-in-law. The men still have a big task to complete in the kitchen and that is the job of kneading the special dough for *luchi* or *paratha*, which are different types of bread that are served for breakfast the morning of Eid. Usually the night before, the men knead the special doughs that are required, often kneading for hours at a time with breaks in between until the desired consistency is reached. This can take up to 5 hours or so depending on what type of *luchi* or *paratha* is being made for Eid. In this section, we can see that men and women share chores when it comes to Eid, even if it is not usual in everyday life for the men to participate in kitchen duties. The performance of 'Eid chores' varies from household to household and family to family. From my participant observation, generally, the men contributed in the grocery shopping and some of the cleaning, aside from kneading the dough, while the women focused on cooking and tidying up so that everything looked presentable for the guests. To draw some of my personal experiences, contribution is partly dependent on the level of excitement. In the past, I have seen my father, uncles and other family members

participate in chores when they were very excited about celebrating Eid. There have been other years when they are not as enthusiastic and do not want to do as much. But in general, they are usually the shoppers who are responsible for buying the raw food products for Eid.

In three different houses where participant observation was conducted, the men were in charge of making the bread for the morning of Eid as well as part of cleaning up the house and the kitchen for both Eid events. When asked, one of the men (who was also the father of the household) replied that he is leaving the women to do what they know, while he is contributing what he knows to do (the cleaning) as his part of the chores. He also said that if he didn't help out, then everything wouldn't be done in time as his spouse wouldn't have time to do a good job on the cleaning as well as the cooking, and the family would lose face if the guests came for a visit into a dirty house. It is also interesting to note here that in all cases (for both events in all the three households that were observed), the women did certain household tasks that they didn't think the men could do, all of which involved decorating, such as putting out nice cushions for the couches, the right coloured towels in the bathroom, making up the beds with the fancy bed-spreads, cleaning and changing curtains, just to name a few.

Guests are a very important part of Eid, because is centred around sharing food and eating together. During Eid (both of the Eid events are being included here), one visits family, relatives and friends. This visiting aspect is usually carried out on the day of Eid, the day after and the day after that. For Eid-ul-Adha, when you visit, you bring over the share of meat that you are giving to your hosts, but for Eid-ul-Fitr, you do not

have to bring any gifts. The guests themselves count as gifts, and to not have guests marks a very sad occasion because it means you do not have anyone to celebrate with you or anyone who cares about you. However, it is customary to buy new clothes for the day of Eid (for both events), and children take delight in showing off their new Eid clothing. Visiting cannot start until the morning prayer for Eid has been done (for both events). Once people have observed the prayers in the mosque, the visiting can commence. All Muslims greet each other with the phrase “Eid Mubarak” and hug each other during the celebratory time which includes the following two days. However, only women hug other women and only men hug other men. Sons and daughters either hug their parents or perform a 'salaam' where they bend down and touch their hands to the feet of the elder and then touch their foreheads and their heart as a sign of respect. So the elders get 'salaams' rather than hugs, and other men and women just exchange the greeting without hugs, unless they are siblings or classificatory siblings.

Food is not limited to breakfast, lunch and dinner. One can visit up to five households a day, which means that in each household, you must have a meal to celebrate the food and the occasion of sharing. There may be anywhere between four to fourteen items of food, including deserts. Not everyone can afford to cook as much, but generally, the more you cook the better it is because you can feed a lot of people. Similarly, the more items you have, the better it is because then you are entertaining your guests properly with much variety, giving them a choice of what they want to eat.

The quantity and the number of items are also important in terms of family honour, as one does not want to shame the family name by serving the guests poorly or

with too little food for a big event like Eid. Not to serve enough or not to have a variety of items (main course and desert) implies that you do not wish to share the bounty of this event with your guests, which puts you in an unfavourable light in the community. Of course, there are exceptions. If you are living in poverty or quite poor, it is considered a “sunnah” or an extra blessing if you attempt to share what meagre foods you have with your neighbours and relatives. You are commended and thought of as being of good character.

In the three households observed, usually the children were served first and the adults later. The meals were taken together (with both men and women) and at around the same time, and since there were a lot of guests, they ended up forming groups together of men and women or sitting together (both genders) for the meal.

Now, we will move on to Durga Puja and Diwali which are festivals of Hinduism.

How is this related to food? A significant aspect of this ceremony is the offering of prepared food to the goddess Durga and to the followers who are observing her worship. There are sets of rules and regulations for those who are following the Puja, including the type of food that they can consume. For the six days when celebrations are held, there are specific items to be consumed each day for breakfast, lunch and dinner – aside from the special offerings that must also be made for the goddess. Not all Hindus are vegetarians – it is restricted to Brahmans and people who may wish to follow stricter rules. Some Hindus, not all of them Brahmans, are vegetarians, and some high caste Brahmans are vegans rather than vegetarians, observing stricter dietary rules. Among the women interviewed, two of them identified as Brahmans. While the others did not state

their caste, they informed me that they come from vegetarian families. So, there are added food proscriptions in addition to the usual food practices during the ceremony. To provide an example, the first day of the durga puja, for breakfast foods that can be consumed are Luchi, Aloo Dum ( a dish made with potatoes), Rossogolla (spongy sweets made from milk curds), whereas on the second day, the breakfast to be consumed includes Koraishtir Kochuri, Cholar Daal and Malpoa. Each day, the menus for breakfast, lunch and dinner are different than the day before, and effort is made to not repeat foods twice within that 6 day period. As my informants were vegetarian, all the food mentioned in the menu is vegetarian. Since only two claimed to be Brahmins, I can only speculate that others either adopted Brahmin customs, or changed to a different lifestyle post-migration, assuming that they were not vegetarian before. Some may have adopted a vegan, as opposed to a vegetarian diet, in response to Canadian ideas of vegetarianism. Meals can be vegetarian or strictly vegan depending on the household and taboos for food are observed very carefully. So, in vegan households, sweets and other foods that contain milk products will not be served. Instead, a substitute sweet or food product that does not contain any dairy will be used in its place. However, if the household contains a combination of vegetarian and vegan family members, then both vegan and vegetarian foods will be made. In order to follow taboos, the foods will be prepared separately so that the vegan foods do not come into contact with the vegetarian food products.

Purity and pollution are important matters. As I mentioned above, the vegetarian and vegan food cannot touch, just the same as the vegetarian food cannot touch non-vegetarian products. Precautions are taken in the preparation process so that the food

does not possess any impurities. During participant observation, I learned that women who were preparing the foods for the Puja could not enter the kitchen until they had showered at a specific time in the morning. This allowed them to rid themselves of impurities before they touched the food meant for the occasion. A woman who is having her period, is considered impure in very traditional Hindu families and one out of the two households that were observed did not allow the menstruating woman out of her room so that she could not taint the preparations for the Puja. Menstruating women sit apart from non-menstruating women, once again due to the fear of contamination or pollution because she is bleeding. Bodily fluids are considered impure, and since women experience menstrual cycles and bleed once a month, they are considered much more impure in comparison to men. So it is only when the preparations were done and the foods were taken to the temple or put in the little shrine at home that is devoted to the goddess, then the menstruating woman was allowed out of her room with caution. In terms of eating arrangements, the women ate separately from the men whether or not they were menstruating. It is an unwritten house rule that is followed.

When addressing purity laws, it is impossible to not mention the caste system, since purity and gender are both connected to caste. Among those outside of the caste system, the Harijans, also referred to as 'the untouchables' are considered to be defiled and polluted, once again bringing in the notion of purity. Purity laws extend not just to food, but to sexuality and lifestyle choices as the ideal woman is also a pure woman (Liddle & Joshi, 57). In this caste system of purity and pollution, the Brahmins as the highest caste are considered to be the most pure in the scale of purity and pollution. This

also means that in terms of following taboos, they have the strictest level of rules and regulations to follow.

The men were served first during meal times (usually as soon as they came back from the temples) and meals were served hot to them. After the men finished eating and went back to the temple, the women could eat their food together. That is how the tradition is observed. Women participated in Puja related events more so in the late afternoon and at night, once they had finished the cooking. Both households that were observed for participant observations had nuclear family units, with grandparents that had travelled to be with the family just for the Puja. In these households, the grandmother and the mother taught the younger women how to prepare the foods for the goddess so that they could carry out these tasks when they married. In terms of teaching, the grandmother is usually the more prominent figure who has the time to explain how each food is prepared and why it is important to the goddess, rather than the mother who is busy with getting the preparations done.

Guests are welcome in the evenings after the evening temple service is done, and dinner can be a late event depending on when the ceremonies are finished. The house is also decorated with special flowers for the occasion and the women adorn themselves in gold and wear new saris for the events. One of the households observed was more affluent in comparison to the other, and the women of the household had a new sari every day for the celebrations. In the other less affluent household, new saris were not worn every day, but only on the first day of the event and the sixth or the last day. In between, they wore other good saris. The adornments and the new clothing are markers

of prosperity as well as class and caste, and hosts must be dressed well for receiving guests.

Diwali or the Festival of Lights is an equally important festival. Women dress well for Diwali, adorning themselves in attractive ornaments and saris in hopes that suitors will take notice. It is also celebrated with sharing of sweets. Sweets and traditionally rich foods ( or shahi foods) are cooked to mark this event as a special occasion. It is a vibrant and glamorous festival where the house is decorated, cleaned and re-decorated. This is done because Diwali is believed to bring a new beginning every year to Hindu Bengalis. Mango leaves and marigolds are used as decorations. They represent the vibrancy of this festival and are considered items that are lucky. They bless the host with good luck if they are present in the household. Fireworks and lamps are also part of the celebrations. According to the Hindu calendar this day is considered a day of new beginnings because the day after is the first day of the New Year. So, buying new items of clothing and even kitchen items like cutlery or new dishes is considered to be auspicious for this event and thought to bring good luck to all those living in that household.

Diwali feasts are large and preparations are started days in advance so that they can be ready by the time of the celebrations. As new kitchenware is considered auspicious, if money can be spared, new pots and pans are bought. The women do most of the purchasing for this event (e.g., purchasing new clothing and ornaments). Lots of mithai or sweets are made, which can be made with daals, carrots, flour, milk (for non-vegans), coconuts, nuts and raisins. Sweet and savoury snacks are made. The first day of

Diwali, sheera, which is a fudge like sweet is made and eaten alongside curries and bread. The second day, special porridge with clarified butter or ghee is consumed by those who are not vegans. Some avid Brahmins and very religious Hindus fast all day and break the fast in the evening with those foods. The third day, kheer is made with rice and milk (for non-vegans) and is consumed with different spicy fritters. The actual day of the Diwali and New Years, many other types of vegetarian and vegan items are served to guests to celebrate the beginning of the New Year.

Hindu or Muslim, all four events that have been touched on are centred around food preparation (which takes up to several days leading to the event), the cooking process (which also takes a few days) and then the consumption of the food by hosts' families and guests, which takes significantly less time than its preparation. There is specific etiquette for eating during the festivals, much of it gendered, very much like the gendered tasks and gendered food preparation habits that are also present in these events. The kitchen is considered to be a woman's domain, with some help on certain tasks from the men in the household. Therefore, a lot of the events are punctuated by gendered performances of identity. In all cases, it is the epitome of failure to be unable to provide the proper foods for the events to the guests and it is considered shameful or cheap if preparations are not up to par. So people strive to make better food in quantity and quality to impress their guests, and retain family honour and good name so that they do not have to be ashamed of what they are serving.

## **Food and Dissonance**

Data from the interviews is much more complex, as the person to person interaction revealed a lot of problems and issues that first, second and third generation Bangladeshi-Canadian women currently face. My informants tell me that the most common assumption that the general population has about many ethnic communities is a picture of this unchanging population, with little diversity where almost everyone is the same. When asked, many Bengali-Canadian women themselves have an image of the ideal virtues they believe everyone else has, but which eludes them.

Within the Bengali-Canadian population, there is certainly a notion of 'how things should be' and what is the 'proper way to be' when it comes to behaviour and attitudes relating to identity performance and food consumption. Women who were interviewed stated this belief, and even said that there were people who upheld those treasured values and beliefs, as well as those who performed them. However, the differences that they portrayed (which did not fit cultural ideals) were not looked upon in a favourable light. When talking about previous generations or ways of living 'back home' the general consensus was that things were better there, and that it is the fault of the peoples and individuals in the immigrant country for they are not living up to the 'good' standards set by previous generations.

As I mentioned in the literature review, David Sutton's (2007) work on taste and memory is important to this research. Along with Sutton, who had worked on understanding adaptation and acculturation after migration, there is Michael Herzfeld (1990), another author has worked on 'cultural intimacy.' In this article, Herzfeld

mentions the phenomenon of bending the rules of the present with the excuse that times in the past were better because people obeyed the rules. It shows nostalgia and admiration of a golden past when everything was better, and provides an excuse to relax the norms in the present when things are not so good. Sutton mentions that part of adapting to a new environment means that not all rules, rituals and taboos will be carried out. One way of making people less accountable for their actions is by explaining violation in moral terms. Herzfeld calls this notion 'structural nostalgia' in *Pride and Perjury: Time and the Oath in the Mountain Villages of Crete* (1990). Herzfeld's article focuses on the issue of animal thieving and honour, which are different matters than food and identity. However, the justification for the non-permissible actions is structural nostalgia in both cases. In the mythical past, life was better because people had better morals and behaviours and they followed all the necessary rules. I say 'mythical' because it is a coloured lens through which people view the past, and it is not necessarily the truth. This shows that there is diversity, and that there is change- it is not a static, unchanging society where all women wear saris and eat the ethnic food, living a simple life. The focus on a traditional way of life or what is believed to be the proper way of living, leaves people who are not living up to expectations and are transgressing from the 'ideal norms' as they adapt and acculturate to Canada.

Similarly, when asked what they considered their nationality to be, there was a range of answers from "I am Bangladeshi" to "I am Bangladeshi-Canadian" to "I am Canadian." Clearly, this shows that not everyone from a given ethnic background clings to the one and only proper way of performing identity, which is, you are Bangladeshi or

Bengali and that is what you are even if you do not live in Bangladesh anymore. It is proof that people change with their circumstances and their environment. Yet, at the same time, many .who stated that they were Bangladeshi Canadian were perturbed by guilt that they felt for not feeling 'wholly' Bangladeshi. Such guilt is transferred from the parents to the children for experiencing the change that causes these differences to crop up. Also, not all the 'I am only Canadian' responses came with a clear cut answer.

The research flyers and the advertisements for volunteers specifically stated that I was looking for Bengali women, who identified as Bengali and were of Bengali origin. What then would have prompted someone volunteering for the study if the participant considered .herself to be “Canadian?” This was one of the questions I wanted to ask. Did it imply that she did not want to acknowledge her Bengali origin with a hyphenated identity or to acknowledge it at all? However, the answers were not so simple and usually not very clear cut. In one scenario, a participant stated that she did not always acknowledge her ethnic identity as she considered herself Canadian. Therefore when people asked her that question, she answered Canadian, and if further questions were asked she was usually offended. But for the purpose of this study, I tried to understand why it was offensive to her if someone wanted to know where she was from. That is an answer that has yet to be found. Every participant had a different response, and for some, they simply did not think that people had the right to know their entire ancestry without first knowing who they really are as persons and individuals.

The fear of being judged is a sentiment that participants mentioned, especially since some suffered guilt for not feeling 'wholly' Bangladeshi. This fear of being judged

extended mostly to family members and community members who would assume that the Bengali heritage was being denied. However, participants did not mention whether they were afraid of being judged by a 'Canadian' community. The fear of being judged by community members also implied that these women wanted to please the Bengali community and have their family and community members be proud of them.

Food as usual plays a crucial part in all of this. Food and identity construction are linked as food conveys social values and ideologies that are transmitted from women to women, impacting how women shape their identity and to what extent the social beliefs and norms affect them. Many participants stated that generally Canadians thought Bangladeshi people were no different from Indian people, and they (the generic South Asian peoples) only eat spicy and smelly foods. Most of the women who volunteered in the study also said that they always take precautions so that they don't 'smell.' In other words, they take precautions so that they don't emit the smell of the food that they cook if they are eating traditional meals, because it smells 'funny.' Whether this involves using sprays and deodorants, or airing out the house with Febreze and other branded products to freshen up the atmosphere, they are aware of the sensory perceptions of mainstream Canadians. Sensory perceptions play a role in how we perceive/ judge/ stereotype/ visualize/think of and treat individuals. By trying to 'blend in' in terms of smelling nice to others and blocking strong or spicy odours, these women are trying to avoid being judged or misjudged as assumptions about odours are often related to cultural stereotyping about hygiene practices. In this context, appearance takes a dominant role when interacting with the world outside of the home but it is not restricted to the realms of smell.

Physical appearance is also important. Whenever food is the topic, dieting is never far behind. Body image and dieting often go hand in hand, and, as the data set reveals in this case, disagreement about food and dieting can cause interpersonal conflicts. It is clear that women receive confusing information when it comes to food and dieting. On the one hand, young women want to look the best that they can so that they have better prospects for marriage, a goal with which many parents agree, while on the other hand, traditional food does not have the dieting components that Canadian consumer foods have (though this too is a misperception). While the parents want their daughters to look good, be healthy and also eat the traditional foods, many of the daughters feel that eating the traditional diet will make them fat and unhealthy due to the use of oils, whereas the convenient 'on the go' food often is a better choice if they want to retain their figure, keep slim and be beautiful. Here, 'on the go' foods refer mainly to cereal bars and granola bars, which women stated were better choices for snacks and meals (especially for dieting purposes) than traditional foods. It is important to keep in mind that many foods labelled diet are not all that low calorie if eaten in sufficient quantities not to be hungry. There is a real possibility that the women are simply restricting their total food intake regardless of the type of food they are eating.

The journey to the perfect figure and keeping the ideal body shape comes with a cost. Not only does it involve rigorous exercise and adapting to a different type of food habit, but it also means the abandonment of a traditional custom where women cook. This is a primary cause of dissonance between mothers and daughters, as the mothers want the daughters to retain their traditional way of cooking (after all generations of women have eaten these foods and had no problems with body shape) but also meet the

physical standards of the ideal body. It is an attitude where everyone can have it all, and one that everyone can accomplish if they just tried hard enough. In the case of the women that participated in the study, many have tried to maintain the traditional diet and keep the body that they want, and simply believe that the Bengali diet is harmful for your body. It is okay once in a while to consume such foods for special occasions, but not for the every day. This causes a wedge between the mothers and daughters or daughters in law, as the older generation believes that they are not eating appropriately, while the younger generation believes that their parents eat too much! This also discourages the passing down of recipes, and from my data sampling, in cases of some participants, a loss of women's knowledge, as the social values and practices surrounding food end with the parents' generation. Now, this is not to say that this situation will not rectify itself in some ways later on in life as the women in this sampling are quite young, between 19 and 25. There is no quick solution to this problem, as it is a situation which has resulted .from an enormous social pressure for women to conform to the image and the widespread emphasis being placed on 'healthy food habits' and life style choices. In fact, we should consider that women who ate the traditional diet might have been cooking a traditional diet that is also healthy, having more vegetables, lentils and fish. This would mean that other than special occasions, what they ate was moderately healthy and helped them avoid weight problems.

There are recurring themes within the research despite the dissimilarities in the participants. One way to organize the themes is by generations, and then cross-compare them to see which ones come up the most often. Within the first generation, the most common themes in relation to food are: identity-nationality, family dynamics, mother-

daughter and daughter-in-law relationships, career/education, gender dynamics, cooking, diet, body image, aesthetics/beauty, dating/marriage, religious festivals, religion and transgressions (transgressive behaviours – in relation to marriage, religious conflicts, breaking taboos). In the first generation data set, the ratio for Muslim participants to Hindu participants is 6: 3, counting the woman who identifies as Hindu/Pagan. She referred to herself as 'Pagan' as she had adopted North American Neo-Paganism as part of her belief system along with following aspects of Hinduism. Interestingly enough, exactly the same things are prevalent in the second generation in the data set with the exception of one more theme that starts to become more prominent: language. Another theme that was present in the first generation in a minor scale, but becomes fairly predominant in the second generation is 'tradition' vs. change and how women negotiate their relationship within the boundaries. Here, I once again remind the readers that 'tradition' as a term is not being used analytically; it simply reflects the everyday language of my participants. All five second generation women who were interviewed were of Muslim background, so the Hindu perspective is missing from this equation. The third generation sampling also fits all the themes that have been mentioned before, with gender as one strongly recurring theme. Gender issues evolve from dealing with a gendered division of labour and gendered attitudes in the family and marriage. Interviewees also mentioned pushing against the boundaries of gender, introducing the notion of transgendered identity into the equation. Another interrelated theme that develops is that between transgression and religion, as we encounter a participant who has changed her religion from Islam to Hinduism.

In the third generation sampling, there were only three participants, two of them Muslim and one Hindu. This is a comparison that I was able to make due to the use of pile sorting and Grounded analysis to produce themes.

## **Recurring Themes in the Data**

For the purpose of understanding how the aforementioned themes are connected and why their unique ties to food and identity shape the lives of Bangladeshi-Canadian women, I will take a detailed look at each of the themes and organise them by generation.

### **Identity-Nationality:**

Women choose to represent themselves by national identity. As touched upon earlier, the women identify themselves Bangladeshi, Bangladeshi-Canadian or just Canadian. Within the first generation, there are two major ways in which the women deal with their national and regional identity. While some participants recall the move to Canada, some of them have gone through a double migration, which means that they lived as permanent citizens in another foreign country before Canada and they do not recall this earlier migration. Responses are spread between participants who are strongly connected to their roots through visits to their native land and know their cousins and relatives to those who frequently or rarely go for visits and are not very connected to their family. The women mainly identify as Bangladeshi with the exception of one participant who does not want anything to do with her Bangladeshi heritage due to discrimination faced by her parents for their interracial marriage.

Within the second generation, the responses are not as clear cut with respect to national identity. Some second generation participants have never even visited Bangladesh or known family members who lived there. Even among those who had

made one visit at a younger age, there was a disconnect. Though they have seen pictures and heard stories, the opportunities for a return visit never emerged. These participants identify themselves as Bangladeshi-Canadian or Canadian with the explanation that they feel more Canadian because they prefer aspects of Canada that make them feel as though they were only Canadian. Considering that they have not visited their country of origin or have only been there once, it is a surprise to find that they feel this way. As mentioned above, the admission for some women is not guilt free as they believe they should relate more to their heritage and country of origin, but simply do not feel the same connection as they do with Canada. I assumed that as the women progressed through the generational gap, their connection to their land of origin would decrease based on the fact that having most of their family members live in Canada and because they had made so few visits back home.

However, in the third generation, there is reclamation of Bengali identity, even among those who have not experienced the country of origin. Now, this is only true for the sampling conducted for this research, and the data set for this generation was not as large as the first and the second. Though there is not a large enough third generation contingent to make a claim of identity reclamation, it is not entirely an unknown phenomenon. Research has been conducted in regards to acculturation and reclamation by Glazer and Moynihan (1963) who are well known for their theory of the 'melting pot.' Glazer is known for looking at issues of ethnicity, migration, acculturation and reclamation in the United States among various ethnic groups. In the book *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto-Ricans, Jews, Italians and the Irish of New York City*, he introduces the issue of identity, and how in third generation and only in the third

generation there is a revival of claiming the ethnic identity as way of achieving ethnic consciousness.

The expected trend was that third generation women would identify as simply Canadian. One participant noted that she was confused that her family considered her more 'Canadian' than Bengali and that she was not looked upon favourably. One of the women actively participated in keeping her Bengali identity through learning how to cook traditional foods and identifying with the region. Another woman identified as Bengali but did not participate in cultural events or go out of her way to learn how to do something traditionally. Finally, a third participant stated that her family considered her 'Canadian,' almost as if they had chosen this identification for her by not considering her 'Bengali.'

#### Family Dynamics:

Due to taboos and proscriptions, family dynamics can be approached through the lens of religion for the purpose of this study. Hindu participants in the first generation stated that a large part of family expectations was learning how to do the traditional ways of life through the puja, through cooking and through understanding the social conventions that were in place. For this sampling, all three women were very family-oriented and lived at home within the nuclear family. The bonds between the parents and the participants were strong and the women talked about achieving the best result they could in their careers and education so that they could help their parents financially and look after them as the years progressed. There is an overt realization of

the sacrifices that the parents have made in order to provide a good life for their children.

Among the first generation Muslim participants, the family units and the bonds were not as strong as among the Hindu participants, and in some cases, there was friction between the parental generation and that of the first generation. While some have conformed to the ideals, values and beliefs set by their parents, out of want or necessity, others have rebelled against the ideologies that govern how they should live their lives. Not all families are harmonious, and in instances where there are extended family members involved, like grandparents or aunts and cousins living as a part of the family unit, women have reported a lot more tension, and friction between family members and high expectations of conformity.

In most cases, the conflicts focused on the participant's perceived deficiencies, whether it was her inability to learn the customs well, to prepare food, to fit a certain body image or physical image, her eligibility for marriage, or her emphasis on education and not enough on traditional ways for becoming a good wife – these are the shortcomings spotted by parents and other family members which caused points of tension.

In the sampling for the second generation, there is a move away from the extended and towards a nuclear family unit. There is also the introduction of a divorce in the family unit. One participant subsequently made the choice of living by herself with occasional visits to her parents, or parent, in this case, as she allies herself with her mother over her father. She describes the situation as being no different from the

average Canadian family. Two of the participants in this sampling were married, and had families of their own, and although one of the women wished to move closer to her family members, both maintained the need to live only within a nuclear family unit with their husbands and children. By Second Generation, most people are not living with their extended families, and desire to have smaller nuclear families of their own. The women expressed the desire to have only one child or two rather than larger families. In one instance, the grandparents' generation and the parents' generation entered into a conflict, as the elder generation did not understand why the grandchild should be sentenced to grow up without any playmates or companions.

The sampling for third generation becomes more complex as physically abusive family units were evidenced. This is not to say that forms of abuse do not exist in first generation or second generation families. Talking about abuse is discouraged as it is seen as a dishonour to a family if negative things about the family are brought into the open. Members of the family 'lose face' in the community, or suffer deep shame if 'family secrets' become a matter of public affairs and public knowledge. Generally, the. In this dysfunctional setting, the family becomes harsh, calculative, abusive and threatening when the participant does not conform to the beliefs, ideologies and expectations set by family members. In this case, two of the third generation participants broke the pattern and were brave enough to confront their families about their ill-treatment. Two participants who were victimized by their family expressed feelings of isolation, rejection and alienation. These women were made to believe that they are not worthy of the love of the family and that they deserved the abuse they experienced. Despite their guilt over being 'difficult' and not following customs, these

women have chosen to try to break away from their family units and to make a life on their own. This includes making the private family affairs a public matter and reporting the family to the authorities for their abusive behaviour. The other family unit in the third generation sample is a nuclear family unit where conflicts exist because of the daughter rejecting traditional foods in favour of what she considers to be healthier, Canadian meals.

Two of the cases in this particular generation need to be explained in some details. One case involves a family's inability to accept and understand their daughter as a transgendered individual. The most horrific of all reactions is the physical and mental punishment allotted to her for being a worthless, lowly hijra. An important distinction needs to be made here. The term 'Hijra' as used by Serena Nanda describes a specific gender category in India where men have gone through castration and become part of a community of individuals who have a revered role, perform in marriage ceremonies and bless the birth of children among other social roles. The term 'hijra' in Bangladesh on the other hand is used to refer to any individuals who are engaging in a form of gender bending. Therefore, gays, lesbians, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual etc. individuals are simply labelled under the umbrella term of 'hijra' and it does not at all represent the Hijra as defined by Serena Nanda and others. Here, the parents utilized locking her in a room without food and severe beatings as punishments to 'make a man' out of her. The intensity of their actions only increased as they believed she was faking this identity, as no one born with the genitals of a man could ever be a woman, certainly not in a Bengali family, calling it 'Un-Bengali' to be a person of fluid gender identity. Not only was it 'Un-Bengali,' but it was also 'Un-Muslim' as the parents and family members told

her repeatedly as a way to justify their abuse. In Bangladeshi Muslim families' homophobia is deeply rooted: being homosexual or transgendered is considered to be against the natural order. God or Allah created man and woman and the institution of marriage for reproduction and social order. In such instances, being a Hijra is not seen as a revered or tolerated role. An example of mistreatment at the hands of a family comes through in the interview with another participant of this generation who after she switched from Islam to Hinduism in her spirituality, encountered utter shock, disbelief, forced conversion back to Islam, attendance at religious camp and other forms of persuasion before she ran away from her family.

There is no clear cut graph that can predict family dynamics, as it varies from family to family and does not follow any set pattern. The women in this study experienced a range of familial settings ranging from loving to uncaring to abusive families. To what extent is this situation culturally promoted or socially promoted? In some cases, the pattern of abusive behaviour, physical or emotional, comes from an extreme rigidity to maintain a certain way of life, being or ideology as for example, when there is a transgendered family member or a religious convert in the household. It is quite possible that there are many first and second generation women in Bengali families who have not overcome the social conditioning of keeping family matters private to reach out and ask for help as these two third generation participants have done. In other instances, parents were critical of body image and created a social pressure upon the women to conform to a particular standard of beauty. And then, there are units where the parents and the daughter live in harmony without a lot of daily discord. This varies. It cannot be said that parents in the first generation are more likely

to be loving and parents in the third generation are more likely to be abusive. Further research needs to be conducted in a larger sampling to ascertain what is going on within individual families. But what can be said is that there is evidence of stronger parent-child bonds within the first generation than second and third based on the examples that have been collected from this study. It is pertinent to keep in mind that all data were collected within the span of a forty minute semi-structured interview and are solely based on what the participants have volunteered within that time span.

#### Mother-Daughter-Daughter in law relationships:

Mother, Daughter and Daughter-in-law relationships form a triangle of hopes, expectations and demanded values. The mother is the primary power-broker in these relationships. She determines what gets taught and transmitted through the daughter. The daughter is in the receiving end of all the expectations that are demanded by the mother, so that she can carry on the teachings of the mother. Cooking is a main source of tension as it is a symbolic substitute for all the values, beliefs, social norms, standards of behaviour, etiquette, gendered ideologies, and marriage choices that are at play between mother and daughter. Cooking provides an expression for all the issues and gives voice to the frustrations experienced by both mother and daughter. The daughter-in-law on the other hand is already expected to know the cultural values and ideals and it is demanded that as a daughter-in-law she uphold the necessary traditions and keep order in the household, and later on, pass on those teachings to the granddaughters so that they may continue on through the generations. In Manisha Roy's *Bengali Women*, Roy states that the mother of the daughter often feels that no matter what she or her

husband plan for the daughter, her ultimate destiny is to go to *sasur-bari* (the house of the in-laws) and suffer the same plight that she did as a mother, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law and wife (1972: 21). Often the grandmother discourages the girls' education, in which the father takes an avid interest, for household chores and duties, as she is 'fated' to become a wife. In this case, the grandmother might try to snatch the girl away or insist she will be better off in a kitchen learning what is going on in the kitchen (1972: 21).

The source of conflict between mothers and daughters is expressed through the preparation of traditional food, learning recipes and understanding the social rules that govern food consumption. Why is this issue a source of problems? The reasoning is simple. Women's frustrations are reflected in their attitudes toward homemaking and food, whether they choose to display their frustration through refusing to do household chores or focusing their attention on their education as a means of building their careers, negating the need to know how to cook, or simply stating that they do not wish to learn these recipes because they believe they are part of an unhealthy way of life.

The refusal to be the primary cook within the family unit, the refusal to settle down and accept an arranged marriage instead of focusing solely on their education, refusing to eat the traditional diet, even refusing to conform to their mothers' standards of beauty are all ways of expressing a discontinuity with the trend of passing on certain gendered ideologies. Dieting, exercise and cooking are used as forms of resistance within the family to show that they do not have to follow all the rules or bend to the expected cultural notions of 'how to be a proper woman.' This causes a major conflict,

because the mothers see this as an outward sign of disrespect towards not just the family but the culture as a whole; these women represent a group that is turning their back to their cultural heritage.

Among the first generation of women, there are examples of women that believe that food keeps families connected and that knowing how to cook and prepare a person's favourite food shows that you love them, you want to take care of them and that will not forget what makes them happy from one day to the next. There are rules of etiquette that are followed to show respect- such as waiting with your family rather than eating alone, letting the person who is more hungry have additional portions, and so on. However, there are also behaviours that demand one gives the largest portion to the men and the smaller portions to the women, even if the girl is hungrier, bringing in gendered ideologies into food serving. In retrospect, the smaller serving portions for women and the preferential treatment of men might have also been accountable for the regulation of women's body weight, though that might not have been the original intention. Most first generation women genuinely enjoy the taste, texture and feel of the traditional foods and diets, but balk at the chore of cooking it. One participant stated that once you learn to cook, then you are expected to cook all the time. With other chore expectations already in place, cooking is a task that women may wish to avoid. This is not to say that they do not recognize the importance of food and the meanings behind it. Simply that they would rather enjoy the freedom to choose: eating out, buying frozen dinners and other easily consumable food items, and even limiting what is being eaten allows these women to rebel against the norm. Being a woman does not guarantee that one is going

to be a great cook. There are women in the data set who feel they so severely lack cooking skills that boiling water is the best that they can do!

Another point of friction begins with women living at home as they grow older because then it is automatically assumed that the mother must prepare the daughter for marriage, and this form of preparation comes from teaching the daughter to crochet, knit, mend and repair clothes, household chores and of course, the most important of all, knowing how to cook so that she does not shame herself or her mother in front of the in-laws. As the mother's ideal is to teach the daughters how to be a proper wife by knowing these tasks, the inability to perform these tasks reflects badly on the daughter's social upbringing (Roy, 1972: 74). Therefore, finding ways around the cooking arena, like eating out, is one solution that daughters have found to this problem. Whether the girl goes to college or takes a job, she knows that she must be married sooner or later. Yet, in the first generation where so much of the focus lies on the continuation of tradition and passing on women's knowledge to the next generation, the mothers-in-law are highly critical of daughters-in-law who are unable to perform household tasks. So, even if the daughter has an inordinately high education, a good career and desirable beauty, she may be the focus of her mother-in-law's complaints if she believes she has any shortcomings. The mother-in-law keeps a shrewd eye on her new daughter-in-law, especially if she is the wife of her favourite son as they are now both competing for his attention. So, any shortcomings on the daughter-in-law's part are seen as a big complication that the mother-in-law might complain to the son about (Roy, 1972: 93-96).

The focus on dieting, considering traditional foods to be too high calorie and high fat and thinking it is too unhealthy to consume is the other side of the problem that causes mother-daughter tension. With the plastering of the 'ideal' Barbie body in the media, women have become significantly more body conscious and health conscious. The way of maintaining such health often comes at a high price: refusing what you like to eat, constantly being on a diet, calorie counting and exercising. The obsession with eating healthily, also brings with it issues mothers and daughters share or bicker about in terms of body image, aesthetics and beauty, giving not one but many conflict-ridden issues.

In the second generation, the participants do not focus as strongly on the mother-daughter bond as the participants from the first generation do. They speak mostly of unanimous parental expectations, such as marrying an educated, well established Bengali man and getting a proper education so that they can set up a career and lead a good life. However, though there is not a lot of focus on the mother-daughter bond in most cases. For one participant, who grew up with both parents but whose parents are now divorced, there are fond memories about her mother. Two participants of the second generation are mothers themselves, and they speak of giving their children a better life as stay at home mothers. One plans on continuing to be a stay at home mother while the other wants to pursue a career once her child grows up. Yet, there is an absence in their narrative as they do not talk about their own relationships to their mother. One person mentions that she wants to move closer to her family, but family is used as a collective noun and, once again, no details are shared about her own relationship to her mother. Surprisingly enough, they also do not mention much about

the relationship to their mothers-in-law, which would have been beneficial to the study in tying together the triad of mother, daughter and daughter-in-law relationship.

It is important to mention here that the data collected is limited by what was only a 40-minute interview though these are the topics that these women chose to talk about within that time frame. This finding is ambiguous because it might simply be what people think is appropriate to talk about and admit during an interview as opposed to how they really feel about the situation. Contemporary films such as *The Namesake* (2006), Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2004), (which is now a Motion Picture) as well as the older Motion Picture *The Bengali Night* (1988) are a few fictional examples where mother-daughter, or daughter-in-law and mother-in-law conflicts or even parent-child conflicts are prevalent. These movies feature the generational gap and the inability of the parents and children to understand each other, following migration.

In the third generation narratives, there is the presence of mother-daughter conflict about dieting and the abandonment of the traditional diet on the daughter's part. One informant describes her mother's feelings as irrational, and says that she is unable to accept that her daughter has chosen a different way of life to avoid having to worry about cholesterol levels and blood sugar levels, as her mother does. With the exception of conflict over diet, once again parenting is used along with family in informants' narratives, rather than any specific focus on mother and daughter. Family is used as an encompassing term for parents and siblings.

Mother, daughter and daughter-in-law relationships are arguably the most important relationships in Bengali culture. Earlier I mentioned that food selection,

preparation and consumption is as much about relationships as it is about social issues and conventions. It is the mother-daughter relationships that govern the practices surrounding food and that give it meaning. Food is a metaphor around which deeper issues within relationships may be expressed. This is an issue that Counihan (2008) deals with. Food can be a source of conflict, as it is tied to power. This can be illustrated with an example from Roy's text. Roy states in a situation where the mother-in-law wants to retain control over the new daughter-in-law, she will ensure that the time spent between her son and his new wife is limited by assigning chores around the house; this includes serving her son's food personally, taking care of all of his household needs, and keeping him occupied which leaves the daughter-in-law with very little time to spend with her husband unless it is time to go to bed (1972: 96-100). Counihan and Van Esterik (2008) argue that food is synonymous with gender and the female body; dieting, reproduction, sexuality and gendered tasks are all expressions of women's ties to food and culture. Inness (2001) and Leeds-Hurwitz (2006) speak of women as gatekeepers of enforcing social customs and behaviour. Therefore, food and cooking serve as metaphors for maintaining cultural identity and the socialization of daughters, who will then pass on the traditions to future generations. Ray (2004) indicates that the preparation and consumption of traditional foods among Bengali-Americans go beyond simple actions of 'cooking' and 'eating.' It is a way of reproducing traditional social customs, behaviours, etiquette and beliefs.

### Career-Education:

Education and career are at the forefront of what is expected by most of the informants' Bangladeshi parents so that the children can live comfortably and be financially well off. As I mentioned before, a woman is not exempt from marrying simply because she is financially stable; however, it is necessary for it allows her to have her own assets within the marriage as well as have the ability to purchase things she needs and desires. Many first generation parents migrated in search of a better life and good education for their children and so that the family could prosper through the next generation. However, it can still be a source of conflict when the woman aims higher, is ambitious and is only focused on her education and vocation rather than on having a family.

From the narratives provided, parents in the first generation want their daughters to balance these issues. All of the women interviewed in the first generation are university-educated, but they are still expected to carry on the necessary household chores and activities, along with establishing a nice life through marriage. In close family units, the daughters have expressed the desire to obtain a good education so that they can take care of the parents financially, especially as they age. Education also seems to be a qualification for success, especially for parents. Yet, there is also an example of a severe mother-daughter conflict over education where the mother desperately wants the daughter to learn some household tasks, to cook, and to get married before she gets too old to find an eligible match. In one case, the daughter is a medical student who wants to become a doctor and to follow in her father's footsteps and to make him proud (the father is a paediatrician). Too much education, as another

participant's mother advised, is not a good thing, because no one wants the woman to be more qualified and more learned than the man in the marriage. It makes for a rocky marriage. This is the type of social ideology that the mothers are explicitly trying to pass on to their daughters.

In the second generation, the importance of education remains just as prevalent among the women. There is only one participant who did not attend University. She did not believe she was University material and by then, she was already married. So, she chose to be a stay at home mother instead of pursuing a career. She calls herself a traditionalist who is happy to be a home maker. The only other example of a stay-at-home mother from this data set is someone who has a part time job and plans to return to her career after the children have grown up. From the descriptions provided of parents by women of the second generation, it is apparent that the parental generation includes career oriented individuals who are driven for success and have instilled the same values regarding education and career in their offspring.

In the third generation, other topics overshadowed the discussion of education. Also, the sampling was extremely small which does not allow for any conclusions to be drawn. One participant for sure has not continued to post-secondary education due to extenuating circumstances, but nothing substantially is known about the other two participants other than the fact that they are not attending university at the time of the interview.

The level of education achieved and career choice depends entirely on how important the family considers it to be. The reason for desiring higher education is

usually tied to having a greater financial stability as well as being a 'learned' individual. Though many parents initially migrated to Canada seeking education and have succeeded in sending their children to university, the desire for education has also interfered with the desire to encourage marriage.

### Gender Dynamics:

Gender dynamics can be used to describe the division of labour in the household as well as gendered customs when it comes to eating, etiquette and social behaviour. Social customs that operate on gendered behaviours and attitudes are exactly what many first generation women are rebelling against. It is not that they wish to abandon their cultural roots and heritage, they simply do not wish to be treated unjustly in comparison to their male counterparts-siblings, cousins and other family members. First generation Bengali women in the sample have remarked that male family members like siblings and cousins are often excused from chores for educational reasons while the female members of the family continue to do the chores along with meeting their educational requirements. Within the household, there is a gendered division of tasks (as evidenced by the statements made by the majority of first generation women) with women doing specifically 'feminine' tasks that the men did not want to participate in. In other households, there is evidence of men helping out in the kitchen or sharing some household duties like cleaning, dusting or polishing, but chores that were considered overtly feminine such as cleaning toilets, doing laundry and the majority of the cooking were delegated to female family members. In the absence of a daughter aiding with the cooking, the chore usually falls on the mother or grandmother of the household. One

participant said that she had no issues with doing dishes or drying them and even helping keep things clean around the house, but she did not want to be relegated to cooking because that would require taking an equal share to her mother in the cooking duties if not more responsibilities, as she is much younger.

What causes this unequal gender dynamic in the household? There are certain traditional customs when it comes to men and women that are still upheld in some households. In the grandparents' generation for example, the man of the house and the sons were usually served food as a first priority, getting their pick of the best available meats and other dishes. Though the literature review discussed gendered division of labour as well as the maintenance of social and gendered structures by women, they were not specifically speaking about South Asian families. The only author to touch upon 'cooking' and social etiquette was Ray, who did studies among Bengali Americans in United States. However, he did not really explain the division of labour within the household. Instead, he focused on the reproduction of social and cultural customs that women were participating in by maintaining traditional food patterns. This points out the gaps that exist within the literature, as there is a lack of details about the Bengali household, its dynamics and its division of labour. The serving was done by the women (usually the wife or the mother if she lived with the couple), and it was not until the men had finished eating that the women sat together to eat their meals (usually in the kitchen). This is an example that was provided by a participant who was describing how she had heard her grandmother and many of her grandmother's generation talk about how gendered dynamics have changed between husbands and wives.

It is clear that noticeable changes are happening in social customs from one

generation to the next. However not all the changes are happening as fast as first generation women -- who feel as though they are treated unfairly in comparison to their male siblings -- would like them to. As one of them stated, her bhaia (brother) was praised high and low for managing to cook an egg and it was greatly appreciated that he made eggs for the family. It was an example of an outstanding son. Yet, the same did not apply for the daughter. If the daughter cooked a meal and it was not to taste, it was criticized for not being good enough and her lack of cooking skills was commented on, rousing a sense of shame in her for not knowing. There are some very clear disparities that exist in the way gendered behaviour is maintained and sustained within these families.

This is not to say that all first generation women rebel against this gender hierarchy. In fact, there are examples in the data set that indicate that some women are very happy with the setting of the family, fulfil the expected gendered expectations and like doing things in the 'traditional' way. According to my research, this is a trend that is noticeable in nuclear, family oriented units. In some cases the woman is the only child and in other cases she has siblings, but she is not unhappy with the division of tasks, because as the eldest she thinks it is appropriate to take on more responsibility and to look after her younger siblings.

In the second generation samplings, there is a range of gendered behaviour. In one scenario, the gendered behaviour is not expected (such as being a traditional stay at home mother and not pursuing a career) but the participant feels the need to do it as that is her ambition. There are overturnings of the gendered kitchen hierarchy with a

husband being a primary cook in the kitchen and other examples where husbands and wives share household tasks equally. The performance of chores varies a lot more than it did among parents and grandparents in the first generation. When talking about food performance, serving sizes, who gets served first, there was not a lot mentioned by the participants from this sampling.

In the third generation, gendered behaviour takes a completely different turn as the focus moves away from a gendered division of labour and treatment to gender identity. In one case, a participant struggles with her transgendered identity. This is the only case within the third generation sample, so there is no way to compare this individual to other transgendered or homosexual women in this community. With explicit definitions of male and female, specific attitudes surrounding expected behaviours from males and females, as well as the notions of a gendered division of labour, it is easy to understand why this would be a recipe for a disaster. The participant's only crime was that she did not fit into the gender binary that was set for her by her relatives. She defied gender norms, though not intentionally. If anything, she tried really hard to fit into the standards set by her family. However, she simply did not fit in. Born with male genitalia, she was expected to act, talk, behave and perform all the stereotypical actions of a man. When she failed again and again, she was punished for her transgressions for not trying hard enough. From forced visits to the doctor, to introducing more testosterone into her bloodstream in order to make her more masculine, to setting rigid standards of behaviour and physical beatings to cure her of her 'madness' – the family tried to eradicate this unusual and abnormal gender identity. Eventually, her only choice was to escape.

Looking at the various examples of gender dynamics from first generation to third generation, one thing is glaringly obvious. The performance of specific gendered identity is crucial to maintaining the standards set by the family. Some of the biggest arguments against transgendered and fluid gendered identity are that it is against culture, against the norm, against god and religion. In every way one chooses to look at it, there are arguments about why it is so wrong. Simply put, it threatens previous structures -whether they are religious or ideological- that are already in place, creating a maelstrom of conflict.

#### Cooking:

Cooking as a subject is very much related to topics that have been discussed in conjunction with mother-daughter relationships. Cooking is a gendered performance in most first generation households with women at the helm as primary cooks. Transmission of social attitudes, food performance and identity are interconnected with the art of cooking. Since this has been explained in detail already, more elaboration is not needed about first generation attitudes to cooking, only a reminder that the failure to transmit the cultural values and heritage of Bengali cooking from mother to daughter is occurring due to the fact that some women do not want the primary responsibility of cooking added to their responsibilities.

So, from the data about the first generation, I was surprised to learn that most of the women do not know how to cook traditional food items nor are they trying to master the art of cooking as 'good Bengali women' are expected to. When this project was

originally conceived, one of the assumptions that I had made was that women of the first generation would know how cook traditional foods and participate in the transmission of values, whereas the women in the second and third generations would retain less and less of the traditional culinary arts and would be more inclined to buy 'Canadian' foods.

In the second generation, prevailing attitudes about food preparation, food habits and consumption still exist. Examples range from families who have adopted a more convenient style of eating, such as modifying traditional diet for the convenience of cereals, sandwiches and prepared products to those who try other types of recipe rather than just cooking Bengali cuisine. There is also more co-dependence in performing household and kitchen chores, as well as examples of husbands taking on cooking responsibilities. So, the processes of household task sharing that might have started out in the first generation, gets implemented in a more gender neutral level (at least in some cases) in certain second generation families.

Though many families may adopt more easy-to-prepare products on weekdays, they do enjoy ethnic cuisine on the weekends and for special occasions. For instance, a wedding feast or an engagement feast, as one participant explained, is crucial for a women' family. It must be prepared to perfection by a good chef, and the dishes served must be traditional. Failure to provide those foods reflects badly on the girl's parents from the in-laws' perspective and they may decide to not marry their son into a family where they were not welcomed with the traditional engagement and wedding food

arrangements. This was the explanation that the participant provided as to why the feast must be irreproachable.

Clearly, not all families will place similar values on the occasion or perform the food rituals the same way, but the attention to details concerning the wedding feast within this family shows that not all traditions disappear as the Bengali-Canadians adapt to the Canadian community. However, I want to remind the reader that this was the only participant who talked about her engagement dinner in detail, and the only one in the second generation to talk at all about her wedding celebrations. There is no other individual involved in the study to compare her to.

All third generation women interviewed stated that they cooked their own food, though the sample is too small to draw any general conclusions from this fact. In fact, two out of the three participants relish cooking traditional foods. They are not dependent on the family for meals, so that, it is a matter of making their own meals or getting something from a store. In this situation, they chose to learn how to cook so that they could provide for themselves. As one participant states, she can either cook her own food or spend a fortune for a well balanced meal in restaurants. It is simply cheaper to cook your own meals, especially when living alone.

What this particular study reveals is that some third generation women are more interested in cooking traditional foods than the second generation women in this data set. However, since the third generation sampling is very small, the results are not conclusive. Also, women who participated in the study identified themselves as Bengali in some way, and this is especially true for the third generation women. It is entirely

possible that the data does represent third generation women – for example, those who do not like cooking traditional foods. Furthermore, women of the third generation who have abandoned these traditions might not have been interested in the study in the first place. But these are simply speculations and interpretations based on limited data.

Since all three of the third generation of women had conflicts with their immediate family members (especially the two participants who abandoned their family due to abuse), there is no data that deals with generational change in the mother's attitudes surrounding traditional foods. One participant mentioned her mother in passing when she described her parent's displeasure with her lack of interest in eating traditional foods. This can only indicate that traditional foods are still eaten by the family. Outside of that, it is hard to come to any other conclusions.

#### Diet:

A healthy diet and dieting are concerns that women from all three generations expressed. Some were more health conscious than others, to the point that they rejected traditional foods because they considered them to be unhealthy. But, dieting is important to most women. The topics of dieting and avoiding traditional diet are linked also with the notion of body image and beauty and what is considered beautiful. Many of the young women who participated in the research were anxious to look their best for their boyfriends or for prospective grooms. They did not want to be rejected based on their physical appearance. This is a source of stress that most young women in the study shared, as they were worried about their eligibility in marriage (despite having a good

education and the possibility of a good career). In Gimlin's *Body Work: Beauty and self image in American Culture*, she states that most contemporary women trace their self through their body, and that they engage in reconstructing their body through dieting as well as other means (cosmetics, surgery etc) in order to achieve the level of physical attractiveness that they crave. The downside to that is that it is rare that they reach their goals, since the goals are not always realistic (2002: 4).

The majority of the women interviewed were involved in one form of dieting or another, believing that it would be the only thing that would make them look good. More than one participant said that when she eats a traditional diet, she can 'feel' herself getting fat, also indicating the level of obsession attached to an 'ideal' image. One participant described dieting as a form of empowerment as it allowed women to feel beautiful and good about their bodies. But considering the rigorous regime that most of these women maintain over their eating habits, it seems more controlling than empowering.

#### Body Image:

Connected to dieting is the issue of body image. The women from the first to the third generation who were dieting or concerned with food habits because they wanted to fit an 'ideal' body image ranged in sizes between double zero to one. Yet, they were the most conscious about maintaining their body as they believed it to be linked to beauty. Today's fashion industries and reality television shows represent the skinny body as a marker of beauty and the rounded body as grotesque or ugly. The women interviewed

stated the following television shows as among their favourites: America's Next Top Model, Project Catwalk, The Bachelor, Gossip Women, So You Think You Can Dance, excluding Hollywood and Bollywood favourites. These shows foster the need to strive to be a particular size, more specifically, the size that you see projected on television and movies. Reality television shows such as the Project Catwalk and America's Next Top Model feature women of angular beauty who fit into size double zero and triple zero clothing in a world where 120 pounds on a 5 feet 6 inches model is considered to be on the 'fat' side. In *Body Image: Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men, Women and Children*, Sarah Grogan (2008) states that there has been a significant increase in research when it comes to body image. Research shows that body modification practices such as cosmetic surgery, piercing, tattooing, body building etc are increasing just as much as dieting. However, she notes that many people are using the guise of 'health' to engage in health damaging practices and that positive body imaging needs to be done (2008: 12-17).

#### Aesthetics-Beauty:

The age old phrase of beauty being in the eye of the beholder is being supported as women from the study report shame for being 'fat' or 'ugly' because they are not demonstrating the expected type of beauty. This is tied to comments made by family members who conceive of beauty as decreed by the media. Women in the study have identified features that are beautiful, such as long luxurious black hair, or unique coloured eyes, a sharp nose, long eyelashes, 'not beady eyes,' as a participant added,

along with many other features. Yet, women of all three generations report that those are the standards of beauty that are important and women who possess features such as beady eyes or a flat nose or long 'monkey' shaped ears are not attractive. They are especially not attractive in a marriage mart where the family arranges marriages. More than one participant despaired that she would not get married because she did not think anyone would find her beautiful. Another participant stated that if your father has money, it matters not whether or not you are a true beauty because all the gifts that the in-laws receive will make up for your shortcomings.

Notions of beauty inform our body image as well as our self image and having a very specific 'ideal' of beauty, for body type and for behaviour (as can be derived from the data) is driving these women into making dietary choices that they believe will allow them to be as aesthetically pleasing. Features cannot be changed, but other modes of presenting beauty can be, such as body shape and size. A second generation informant in the study had taken a step further when it came to beauty. She never leaves her apartment without her false eyelashes as growing up she had always been made to feel inadequate for having 'beady eyes and no lashes at all'. She further insisted that painting her nails in different colours drew attention away from the fact that she is darker skinned. The ideal skin tone is white, and therefore, the paler the skin tone, the more beautiful the person. A dark body is seen as unattractive, physically displeasing and is also stereotyped as the 'heavier' body.

Beauty is a social construction. Parents, siblings and others inform us about what they believe is truly beautiful and what is not. As this study considers food and identity

as primary factors, stumbling into a dialogue about beauty and aesthetics came as a surprise. However, as the research progressed, it seemed that a discussion about eating, which had ties to the original research question developed into discussions about body image, and from there it was not that much of a leap to reach a discussion about aesthetics and beauty. This is not a well explored part of the data, but an interesting section that has much to contribute to the overall discussion and presents the data in a new light.

#### Dating-Marriage:

The women who participated in this research shared with me the ideal Bengali marriage: an arranged marriage where the parents of the bride and groom (usually through the help of a match-maker) find the appropriate match. Marriage is a social process, and so the connection is established between families rather than just between individuals. Based on my research, love marriages, where the man and the woman choose their own partners are slowly rising in popularity, but the majority of marriages that occur in the community are still arranged. The data emerging from the semi-structured interviews does not contradict evidence gathered from participant observations. If the reader recalls, earlier in the descriptions of Puja and Eid, I mentioned that women were dressed particularly well for special occasions, wearing attractive clothing and jewellery to catch the eye of a suitor. Ideally, it is so that the parents can display their daughter's beauty and charm, and in order to draw offers of marriage. On the other hand, these visits might also give daughters the opportunities to meet eligible men in passing and perhaps strike up a friendship. The rationale is that the

parents can choose the ideal candidate for their child, so as to ensure the success of the marriage, and therefore a happy life. Of course there is no guarantee that the marriage will succeed, but matching couples using their bio-data (which is similar to their resume) helps the parents to find the most compatible match. In this regard, the parents act like a dating agency, except that dating is side-stepped for an actual commitment.

In order to arrange a marriage, the following must be considered (as advised by the women in the study): educational background, class of the family, in Bengali Hindu marriages- the caste of the family, social standing, financial affluence or stability, previous history of the man or woman (here detailed research is done to check if they have good characters), guardians are needed to act as references and finally, though not always, the process of gift exchange or *joituk* depending on what the family agrees to. In Liddle and Joshi's *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India*, the authors describe that generally marrying out of sub-caste or caste is not permissible. However, there have been instances when women have married 'up' to men of a higher caste. Arranged marriages are the norm, and it is usually between people of the same caste to ensure the purity of the bloodline (1986: 58-59). When it comes to education, class, caste, social standing and finances, parents and guardians look for an equal or higher match. In arranged marriages (since they are not marrying out of love), they must be at least equally matched. The woman and the man should both be equal, and if parents are seeking a husband for their daughter, they usually want to find a husband who is of equal status (financially, educational attainment) or better. Though it is not uncommon for the man's parents to find a woman of high status, it is not customary within arranged marriages. That is a discrepancy that might happen during a love

marriage. The only ways in which parents or guardians will settle for a lower match (that is, where education and/or finances are not equal) is if, for example, the woman is too old or considered an old maid; or if there was a transgression in the past that is unforgivable or hard to explain. However, as one participant suggested, if the woman is beautiful, she does not have to be educated and she can still marry a handsome man from a rich family. Or, in some cases, if she does not mind that he is a little ugly, she can get a really rich husband.

Another instance of settling for a lower match would happen if the women's family cannot afford *joituk*. *Joituk* is the Bengali word for dowry. *Joituk* is a practice that is not always observed in all classes equally. *Joituk* is the practice of the girl's family giving large, often elaborate gifts to the son-in-law for marrying their daughter. These gifts can be anything ranging from a solid gold watch to a certain brand named car or house furniture and appliances to name a few items. Sometimes it can even be combinations of the aforementioned items. This is why parents from non-affluent families often save for years in order to at least try and afford a good marriage for their daughters. The process of *joituk* is also a reason why men are preferred over women. While men bring in the *joituk*, women cost *joituk* to their parents. While upper class parents might exchange through gift giving, and exchange is made by both sides, in other instances it might not work out the same way. There is one Arabic tradition that some upper classes follow known as the 'Mahar' where the man (or his family) must set aside a certain (agreed upon by both sides) large portion of money for settlement in case the marriage does not work out. That money is not tied to alimony, but is a separate asset for the girl and any children that she might have with him. This is not a commonly

practised tradition in all classes. This is mentioned in Liddle and Joshi's text as a form of empowerment since the woman's financial needs are anticipated, securing her future (1986: 64).

Among the women interviewed, there was a range of emotions surrounding marriage. While some wished to have their parents match them with an ideal candidate, others hoped to find love with an 'appropriate' man. By appropriate what is meant is that the man must be from a good family, with a good education, but most of all Bengali and of the same religion so that the marriage can be accepted by the community and the culture. In the first generation sampling, there was a participant who was of mixed ancestry from Bangladesh with a Bengali Hindu father and a Garo mother. Garo is a native tribe in the Northern Hilly areas of Bangladesh, and they practice forms of animism. As a result of discrimination and threats from both side of her family, the parents were forced to escape the country. Luckily they could do so before any tragedy befell them. The informant was raised here in Canada, and is not accepted into the community due to her mixed heritage. She views it as a form of racial discrimination, but most of all, religious discrimination, as she was not raised within a particular religion. Therefore, when interacting with Bengali friends, she does not tell them that she identifies with Hinduism and Neo-Paganism but, if asked, that she is Hindu.

In most Bengali Muslim and Hindu families, women are expected to be modest, demure and be virgins in their marriage beds. The process of dating is highly discouraged, and women who are caught having liaisons or a paramour are severely punished so that they do not repeat that behaviour. Of course, despite strict upbringings

or rigid structures, this varies from family to family and person to person. While some people are more likely to follow these rules, others are more likely to break them. So, within the sampling it was not surprising to find women who have dated in the past or are dating currently. One participant acknowledged being in an interracial relationship, but stated immediately that it was a passing phase and that she would not consider him as a candidate for marriage. Another participant admitted that she speed dates, loves to go clubbing where she 'hooks up' with men and likes the physical aspect of getting to know someone as long as it is consensual. Others have said that their marriage was not arranged, but that they liked someone and were comfortable enough to tell their parents when the time came for marriage that they had found someone. As one participant reported, since he was not inappropriate and was of good standing (background, finance wise) the parents approved of her decision and supported her choice. Two out of the six married informants had married for love rather than settling for an arranged marriage.

The literature review did not produce a large literature or even a moderate literature on Bengali social customs. I did not find anything to support my findings. Most of the literature that was available addressed issues of Bengali diets, ratios and proportions rather than social customs and behaviours.

Dating and marriage are controversial topics. The female informant who had faced much discrimination for her transgendered identity did not think that she would ever find love, let alone a man who would cherish her for who she is. She genuinely believed that there was something wrong with her due to the reactions she experienced from her family. Another informant who had changed religions said that she was very

confused in terms of dating and marriage relationships. She is not very eligible (in her opinion) to Bengali men in general. Any Muslim man was out of the question, for he would find out that she had converted and denounce her on the spot. As for Hindu men, she had not been Hindu long enough to build up a parentage worth consideration. In addition, she does not know what her caste is which would be a big hindrance in match making. She is currently involved in an affair with a married man; she did not believe she would find a suitable marriage candidate from another religion, as she is strong in her faith. Having an affair is transgressive behaviour on her part as Hinduism believes in the woman's purity, especially virginal purity. Affairs are not permissible. That being said, a man is freer to have affairs than a woman because of her coveted status – as daughter, sister and mother -- and the expectations placed on her modesty. Similar standards of modesty are not required of men.

Something that all of the women have experienced from the first to the third generation is dating or marriage. There is no single statement that can be made about the dating and marriage process other than that some women conform to the traditional way of finding a mate, while others want to explore themselves to find out what is right for them, sometimes facing disasters along the way. Nothing in the study indicates that first generation women are more likely to partake in arranged marriages than others, since there are examples from second generation women who have also gone through arranged marriages. Since the third generation sampling is small, no immediate conclusions can be made from that either. When it comes to dating experiences, all three generations of women have experimented with them. In the end, it is personal choice

rather than generation that informs what route each woman takes, at least within my sample.

Dating and marriage patterns often show the breaking down of food proscriptions, boundaries or taboos. Analysis of dating behaviour also showed the breaking of taboos such as consumption of alcohol, which is a banned practice among Muslims. Also, marriage patterns tie in with social expectations of women as daughters-in-law, as primary cooks and the female who passes down gendered knowledge and behaviour surrounding food. Though the connections are not overt, the themes relate to one another.

#### Religious Festivals:

The topic of religious festivals has been explored in detail in the food and social solidarity section through the notes from participant observation section. However, interview candidates (Hindu and Muslim) talked about their personal experiences with Eid and Pujas. All candidates who touched upon religious festivals agreed that they provide an occasion for women to dress up and adorn themselves in fancy garments. In the case of younger unmarried women, it is an auspicious occasion because it shows her off to prospective families that may be interested in marriages. So, when visits are made to the Mandeer or the Puja Mandap for prayers (Hindu) or to the mosques during Eid (Islam), unattached and unmarried women are encouraged to wear their best clothing and ornaments to show off their beauty and eligibility for the occasion. This is not a

hard feat to accomplish, especially since these events are also marked with gifts of new clothing and new jewellery.

Only the first generation women talked about religious festivals and services. They agreed that when a religious occasion occurred, the preparations started days in advance and due to the large number dishes that needed to be cooked, they could not avoid helping out in the kitchen. The one or two times a year when no amount of excuses worked on their mother was during the time of these festivals when everything needed cleaning top to bottom and many dishes needed to be served to the guests. So, concession had to be made for religious festivals as they were different from the cooking on ordinary days. Also, the provision of food is part of the attempt to make a good impression on prospective in-laws who might take an interest in the daughter.

#### Religion:

So, in order to reflect the Bangladeshi reality of two dominant religions, effort was made to include both Islam and Hinduism even they were not equally represented. There are religious food proscriptions in both religions. For followers of Islam, pork, alcohol and drugs are absolutely forbidden. Drugs are included (thought they are not food) as they are a commodity that can be consumed much like alcohol. For followers of Hinduism, a vegetarian or a vegan lifestyle (for the very religious) is maintained by my participants, with total abstinence from meat. All Hindus are not vegetarian. Very devout Hindu families also do not drink alcohol. Within the sample, no Hindus

mentioned consuming meat products, especially beef. They all stated that they were vegetarians and that they did not see the consumption of meat in a good light. This does not mean that Hindus do not break taboos or do not eat meat, simply that there were none in my sample who admitted it even if they did.

The research shows that there exists a wide array of religious devotedness on the part of the participants. Among the first generation, there were examples of Muslim women who were strong in faith that participated in veiling, considering it to be proper, modest and the mark of a good woman as well as examples of Muslim women who drank alcohol and ate pork. Similarly, there were also examples of Hindu women who were very strong in their faith and observed Puja's and learned Sanskrit to better perform religious passages while there were also women who did not particularly identify strongly as Hindu.

The women interviewed in the second generation were all Muslim, and though 'traditionality' was discussed, none of the women spoke about their ties to their religion. Third generation sampling showed evidence of strong faith. The transgendered Muslim woman who was told that Allah punishes the wicked like her and that she could not be a Muslim if she was transgendered, still maintains her faith, does her prayers and observes Eid. The participant who converted to Hinduism and does not have a caste is also very strong in her faith, observes Pujas, learned how to cook vegetarian dishes, and ran away from her family so that she could practice her religion.

When it comes to religion, there is a wide range of examples, going from really religious to somewhat religious to not religious at all. While the women in the second

generation did not talk about religion, from the narratives of the first and third generation women, it can be surmised that it is of importance and that it does affect their lived experiences. Religion was a source of conflict when women felt forced to conform to rigid standards of behaviour.

Transgressions (transgressive behaviour in relation to religious conflicts, cultural, marriage, breaking taboos):

It is fairly clear from the narratives collected that the women engaged in some transgressive behaviour, whether it was for the sake of curiosity, or experimentation. Some transgressions were more dangerous with serious and violent outcomes. The transgressions observed during the research process are mainly religious and cultural, and many involve food and other substances consumed by the body. Violations included: drinking alcohol, using drugs, eating pork, converting to a different religion, not fitting gender norms, breaking dating rules, engaging in an interracial marriage and having a dual religion. These lists of transgressions, some more severe than others, have had different outcomes and are offensive to those setting the social standards and rules because they break essential taboos. In case of drinking alcohol and using drugs, it breaks the social taboo of intoxication that is considered to be highly dishonourable. Alcohol also falls under religious proscription as does eating pork. Converting is unthinkable, as has been explained before. Not fitting gender norms is considered to be against society, culture and religion. Breaking dating rules violates a social and cultural convention. Having an interracial marriage is considered wrong under any

circumstances: social, cultural, societal and religious. Finally, having a dual religion is considered to be unlawful, as it does not clearly define who you are.

The breaking of food proscriptions and taboos show that not all rituals surrounding food are being kept by women of Bengali-Canadian ancestry. Whether this is partly due to adaptation or acculturation, the breaking down of food taboos which are not just part of religious but of social and cultural practices as well show that not all traditions concerning food are deemed relevant by the younger generation.

#### Language:

One's national language is shared and passed on through the generations. Language is a major part of retaining cultural heritage but it is especially important in this case because the freedom to speak Bengali led to the Independence war, which cost millions of lives. Bangladesh, formerly referred to as East Pakistan, broke away from West Pakistan or today's Pakistan to establish themselves as a separate nation called Bangladesh (Brown, 2006: 1-3). The cause of the initial revolt was the recognition of Bengali as the official language of East Pakistan rather than Urdu in the Bengali speaking area of East Bengal a.k.a. East Pakistan. The establishment of 21<sup>st</sup> February as the International Mother Language Day was undertaken by UNESCO in memory of the 1952 killings that occurred in 21<sup>st</sup> February 1952 (Rahman, 1997).

In Bangladesh, 21<sup>st</sup> February is an important national holiday, observed as the Language Movement Day. Celebrated on that day are historically critically events and the pride that Bangladesh achieved with its independence as well as the right to speak

the national language of the region. Therefore, immigrant parents wish to keep their language and to teach the importance of keeping the traditional language even though instruction is given solely in English in the schooling system. Precautions are taken to send children to Bengali schools on the weekends so that they may retain their heritage.

In the study conducted, all first generation women knew how to speak their native language, even the ones who migrated at a very young age, since the parents speak Bengali at home. However, not all of them know how to read and write it fluently as well, though a majority of them do. Surprisingly enough, they did not speak a word of it during research and some of the participants admitted that they feel better speaking English and prefer to speak in English rather than Bengali.

By the second generation, there was a distinct pride among those participants who retained their language. Two of the participants insisted on conducting their interviews in Bengali to show that they have retained their mastery over the language. One of them had taken extended lessons to learn advanced Bangla in writing and reading so that she could teach it to her son. The other second generation participants could speak conversational Bangla but not everyone was very fluent. The range of fluency varied between individuals. Regardless, those that spoke the language were proud of their ability to have kept it and wanted to pass it on (if they could) to their children.

Out of the third generation participants, one of the participants could barely speak any Bangla while the other two informants could engage in intermediate conversations in Bengali. The issue of language retention was not at the forefront. One

of the participants expressed the desire to re-learn more vocabulary and brush up on everyday practical speech while the other two were comfortable at the level of speech that they were at. In the third generation, there was a blending between Bengali and English households. Most speech was conducted in combination, with English being used more heavily than Bangla in the experience of two out of the three participants. I do not have any data which indicates whether or not the third generation attended the Saturday language schools.

#### “Tradition” vs. Cultural Change:

Cultural change is a theme that has come up with generational divides and inter-generational conflict between grandparents, parents and children. Whether the issue was food, identity, gender, religion or aesthetics, there was a tension between the older generation and the younger generation. These changes have affected how food as well as gender, identity, marriage and religion -- to name a few areas -- are performed. While some participants chose to conform to what they perceived to be the “traditional” way of life, embracing the differences and the shortcomings that it posed, others rebelled against a structure that was rigid, full of rules and regulations, wanting to establish their own life away from it. All of the women in the study have tried to negotiate their national, gendered, cultural and self identity through the process of accepting or rejecting traditional values and norms.

## Conclusion

The question “where do you come from?” is frequently answered by many newly immigrated women as Vijay Agnew shares from her own migratory experience to Canada in the book *Where I Come From* (2003). But when this very question is asked of a first generation immigrant after years of residing in Canada, or to second or third generation Canadians, as some of the women in this study reported, the effects are quite different. For someone who has already embraced Canada as a home if not a second home and has chosen to live their life here, it is a question that raises awareness of their difference. Since such a question is usually asked due to the skin colour, it can be isolating and alienating as it implies a status of non-belonging to the mainstream Canadian society or Canada as a whole.

Agnew's memoir addresses the issues of immigrating to Canada from India and establishing herself as a resident, a mother and a professor in an environment where labels are applied to categorize people (2003: 4). By virtue of exploring her ambiguity as an insider/ outsider in not just in the Canadian community, but the larger Indian community, she illustrates the ways in which identity is socially constructed through the relationships, labels and categories that define gender, class and racial attitudes. When Agnew encounters situations where she feels alienated from other Indians during her visits to India, one of the few things that allows her to feel connected and truly believe her status an 'insider' is the ethnic food which evokes memories of her childhood. One such instance lies in her discomfort during a visit soon after her marriage where she noticed the class and caste privilege that allowed her the luxuries of household help like cooks, cleaners, servants and other people to do the work around the house. Though she

felt uncomfortable with the 'status' and privileges afforded by her social position, she entertained the idea of having a servant in America when her cook offered to come back with her and cook for her personally (2003: 144-145). Though Agnew did not want the financial and legal obligation of dealing with such a hassle and firmly resisted the opportunity, she fondly recalls the visit where all the meals were cooked to her preference and she delighted in the taste of 'home.'

Bhat and Sahoo (2003), researchers who conducted studies on Indian Canadians, stated that communities come together in order to maintain cultural identity and promote common interest as a way of coping in a 'foreign' environment. This is achieved by maintaining cultural symbols such as food, language, religious beliefs, dress and art forms, which are all indicators of identity (2003: 142).

Though the population studied for this research is the Bengali-Canadian women from Bangladesh, similarities can be observed in narratives tying themes of identity, food, language and religion. Dhruvarajan (2003) who conducted research on the patterns of adaptations amongst second generation Indo-Canadians identified inter-generational conflict: when parents demand educational achievement while also insisting that their children uphold cultural values. This causes tension as the desire to see children succeed is spurred by the need to improve economic status (from one generation to next) at the same time that cultural values are considered superior to the dominant North American culture (2003: 169).

In exploring marriage, it was found that there is a strong tendency to favour arranged marriages with 'parents knowing best' when it came to mate selection as it is

the preferable tradition (Dhruvarajan 2003: 175). Sources of conflict between parents and their children are due to the sexual double standard with sons getting preferential treatment and the presence of gendered division of labour (2003: 181). Fear of losing their cultural heritage, the values and beliefs that make it 'unique,' makes the parents want to control the behaviour of the children, set harsher standards and impose stricter rules, according to one of the participants in that research (2003: 182).

This study shows the commonalities of gender and marriage patterns between the two research projects conducted in Canada. Dhruvarajan conducted his research among second generation Indian-Canadians which included informants from Gujrati, Rajasthani, Punjabi background while the research conducted for this thesis was solely focused around Bangladeshi women. Yet, underlying commonalities cannot be ignored. Are the similarities a result of the geographical region of origin? All of the informants are from the larger Southern Asia area and share similarities in cultural values and traditions though there are differences in language, customs and social settings. It is possible that the migration to Canada brings out the same issues of concern due to the shared cultural values that are widespread Southern Asia, but they are not realized as shared regional attributes until after their migration occurs.

A topic that is closely tied to identity formation is race and its implications for Canadian youth of South Asian descent. Recent work by Sundar (2006) explores the notion of 'race' in identity development as she studies South Asian-Canadian men and women of second generation who are trying to establish their identity in "*To "brown it up" or "bring down the brown" : identity and strategy in second-generation, South*

*Asian-Canadian youth.*” Race as an influence on identity making is a subject matter that has also been present in the works of Agnew and Dhruvarajan as well, though it was not a theme of discussion in my research. Sundar's study reveals that second generation participants who were between the ages of 18 and 25, consider their identity to be fluid and multidimensional, as defined by the interactions to those around them. They choose between 'doing the South Asian' and 'doing the Canadian' thing in their regular interactions, showing the calculated choices they make about performing their identity based on environmental factors (2006). These youth use identity performance and negotiation as a way of understanding their self, their cultural heritage, choosing how to represent themselves in a wider Canadian society.

Looking at the previous works in this section, I think that the connections between race, identity formation and food structures is a topic that should be explored from the perspective of South-Asian Canadian women. The structure of the project, its focus, and the conversation with the participants did not deal with what the women thought about 'race.' Since the interactions were limited to forty minute interview sessions, race as an issue of discussion did not enter the conversations; it was largely focused on food structures and identity making. Since race is repeatedly noted in the literature as a factor that determines how second generation Canadians define their identity, it is a worthwhile matter to explore.

There are many other areas that have not been as well developed in this research due in part to time constraints. For example, first generation women talk about the importance of mother-daughter, and mother-daughter-daughter-in-law interactions and

relationships and the tensions that lie within it; yet, second and third generation women do not talk about these relationships at all. The cause for this silence could not be explored further due to the time limitations in the interview process and the lack of data concerning the subject.

Another issue that could not be explored further is the ties of language and the differences between first, second and third generation women. Not all participants and certainly not all generations talked about language retention, attending Saturday language schools, and their roles in maintaining cultural ties.

The inability to study all the themes that emerge from this research reinforces the need for further exploration in and research about the South Asian Bengali-Canadian context. There is a glaring lack of scholarly resources concerning social life, patterns of marriage, food rituals, and gendered divisions of labour, to name just a few areas. My final comment, then, is that more research about the Bengali community in Canada and the United States whether it be about communities from Bangladesh or West Bengal is needed. Canada's multicultural policy has allowed many immigrants to call Canada their homeland and so research surrounding food and identity is very relevant in this community. Issues of identity and identity construction are pertinent for understanding a trans-national Canada, where different groups of ethnic majorities and minorities comprise the population. Acculturation, adaptation to mainstream Canada and patterns of internal/external changes within the community are not limited to food habits and change in traditional food structures. Other areas that need further attention include interracial marriages and interreligious marriages which are all part of living in a

multicultural and globalized economic world. Similarly, parenting, gender roles and marriage also undergo subversive change and fluctuation in societies that are in-flux and transition.

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