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BIBLIOTHECA PHOENIX

Elisabetta Marino

*Voicing the Silence: Exploring the
Work of the “Bengali Women’s
Support Group” in Sheffield*

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by



CARLA ROSSI ACADEMY PRESS

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CRA - INITS

MMVIII

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Carla Rossi Academy – International Institute of Italian Studies
Monsummano Terme – Pistoia
Tuscany - Italy
www.cra.phoenixfound.it
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Printed in Italy
MMVIII

ISBN 978-88-6065-090-0

COLOPHON

PRIMA EDIZIONE LIMITATA

A

TRENTATRÉ ESEMPLARI

CON TIMBRO

E

VIDIMAZIONE UFFICIALE

CRA-INITS

Volume n° VI / XXXIII

composto con il carattere Times New Roman

e stampato su carta bianco latte

in fibra di Eucalyptus Globulus

con inchiostro India

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***Voicing the Silence: Exploring the
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Even if the 1991 census report identified the Bangladeshis as “the youngest and fastest growing of all the ethnic populations” settled in Britain (Eade 1996, 150), British Bangladeshi communities across the UK have long suffered from isolation and neglect, being almost *invisible* to the eyes of the mainstream society. Apart from a single, controversial case — that of writer Monica Ali and her 2003 debut novel entitled *Brick Lane* — their voices seem to be still unheard, shrouded in an impenetrable *silence* which has forcibly turned them into “highly segregated” (Ali, 7) and tightly knit enclaves (where women are still relegated to a secondary role), or into anachronistic and displaced Banglatowns, “encapsulated” — as sociologist John Eade remarked — within the British territory, often perceived as hostile and alien. The tragic events of 9/11, 7/7, and the more recent terrorist attacks that took place in London and Glasgow a few weeks ago — with the consequent backlash of fear, antagonism and suspect towards several Muslim communities, among which the British Bangladeshi surely deserve to be mentioned — have further widened the above-mentioned gap between the ethnic and the mainstream

society, thus thickening the already existing wall of *silence* aiming at protecting - while mutually secluding - both parties.

The current situation, however, seems to have affected the city of Sheffield in a rather marginal way. When the British started to send their troops to Iraq, in March 2003, for example, local authorities and community ethnic group leaders (Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Yemeni, most of whom are Muslims) publicly signed a statement entitled “Maintaining Community Harmony”¹, in which they renewed their engagement in improving “Sheffield’s good community relations” (8), encouraged the cohesion among the different threads composing the texture of the society, and “unequivocally condemn[ed] and oppose[d] any racially aggravated violence or incitement to racial and religious hatred generated by [that] conflict” (8). As it was highlighted in the “case study” enclosed in the document, meaningfully entitled *Hand in Hand for Harmony*, the traditionally “multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-faith” (8) city of Sheffield “unlike other neighboring towns and cities [...] did not suffer significant conflicts during the Iraq war” (5).

This particular atmosphere of constructive communication, even in times of international tension such as the present, seems to have created a suitable ground for the birth, in 1985, and the following multi-faceted activities of the “Bengali Women’s Support Group”, a dynamic solidarity association gathered around two charismatic figures: Debjani Chatterjee, an Indian writer and scholar who was born in Delhi and brought up in various Asian and African countries before coming to the UK in 1972, and Safuran Ara, a transnational poet born in Bangladesh, who migrated to the UK in 1975 and recently returned to resettle in Bangladesh. The group gathers women from both sides of the artificially

¹<http://www.renewal.net/Documents/RNET/Case%20Study/Handinhand.doc> (July 18th, 2007).

drawn boundary between East and West Bengal and, in its “Declaration of Intent” defines itself as “an anti-sexist, anti-racist, non-party political group”, involving first generation immigrants, as well as their offspring, coming from different social and cultural backgrounds, ranging from illiterate, unemployed women to scholars and well-off, highly educated executives. Moreover, what seems to be particularly remarkable about the group is its fostering religious pluralism — among its members there are Muslims, Hindus and Christians — thus standing against any form of fundamentalism and promoting interreligious communication. Besides providing its members with support and help in their daily lives, the group has always encouraged women of Bengali and Bangladeshi origin to openly cherish their heritage (thus escaping both the traps of a thorough assimilation and a complete isolation) and to *share* it with the mainstream society through storytelling and writing, thus breaking the thick wall of *silence* that, as noticed before, has so far encircled and suffocated the ethnic community. By upsetting the stereotype of the submissive and “silent” Asian woman, the group has strongly contributed to empower and promote the image of an active and effective Bengali woman, with a leading role, a “Shakti power” — the way Debjani Chatterjee defines it, making reference to the Bengali Hindu goddess of energy, highly regarded by Bengali Muslims as well — and a prominent *voice* that deserves to be listened to.

In so doing, the group has promoted a series of important initiatives, among which the most meaningful is probably the “Book Project” (started as a parallel venture in 1989 by Debjani and Safuran, and now called ‘Sahitya Press’) which, through the employment of oral histories stemming from preliminary storytelling workshops, seems to place the stress on the importance of *telling and then writing* one’s own story as a means of overcoming the hardships of life (thus

contributing to define and redefine one's identity in the new context of settlement), as an act of self-empowerment and, quoting Debjani, "[as] a way of becoming visible", "of effecting the changes that we need in society" (7). The importance attached to orality is highlighted by Debjani herself who, making reference to the storytelling workshops she runs before any "community" publication, remarks that "the 'spoken word' has to be at the heart of [creation]. We have much verbal discussion before anything can be written down"². Starting from the 'spoken', therefore, and proceeding through the 'written' word, the "Book Project" has given life to four bilingual (Bengali/ English) anthologies whose contents and purposes will be analyzed in this paper. The focus on bilingualism should not pass unnoticed: the parallel use of English and Bengali seems to signify the possibility of a "double allegiance" to both past and present, the capability on the part of the immigrants of feeling comfortable with their multiple roots which are *shared* with the rest of the society. Following the study of scholars Lawson and Sachdev, moreover, "the revival of [the] ancestral language" seems to become a "central issue around which group members mobilize" to peacefully "affirm and redefine their group identity" (56) without lapsing, one may be tempted to add, into religious fundamentalism, perceived as a means of piecing up an identity that feels threatened. Likewise, it should not be forgotten that the very foundations of the Bangladeshi identity (as the name of the nation testifies "Bangla-desh", "the land of Bengali") lie in its language, whose dignity and role as one of the official national languages of East and West Pakistan together with Urdu lead, on the 21st of February 1952, to the sacrifice of five students of Dhaka University, demonstrating among others for the

² Personal correspondence, June 21st, 2007.

official acknowledgment of their mother tongue and shot dead by the police.

Let us proceed by analyzing the anthologies more closely.

In the introduction “To the Reader” of *Barbed Lines* (1990), chronologically the first among the anthologies, besides remarking on the importance of the group’s “oral history work” (9), a strong emphasis is certainly placed on language. Debjani Chatterjee and Rashida Islam, the two editors of the collection, point out to a hypothetical reader “wherever [he/she] might be” (7) (and whose ethnic belonging is therefore irrelevant) the importance of a bi-lingual publication since “English and Bengali are both our languages now” (9). They illustrate their process of “transcreation”, which corresponds to a collective effort aiming at the “re-creation” (never a mere translation, which would somehow imply the idea of an “original” and a “mirror copy”) of the poems, stories, letters, diary pages of which the anthology is composed into the *parallel language*, thus showing the women’s attempt at mastering and feeling comfortable in both languages, in both cultures. As it is remarked by the editors, *Barbed Lines* was meaningfully launched on the 21st of February, “Bengali Language Movement Day”, in remembrance of those “who died to use our mother tongue”, and the purpose of the volume, its intention of *voicing the silence*, is openly stated at the end of the introduction:

This bi-lingual book of ours is a very small contribution to keeping our language, and with it, our culture and heritage, alive for ourselves and our children. We need to speak it, we need to hear ourselves speaking it, and we need you to listen. (10).

As Debjani Chatterjee pointed out, by making reference to the bilingual readings from this as well as from the other

three anthologies, “the power of the ‘spoken word’ can lift the words off the page and make them come alive”³.

Among the several subjects the Group deals with (adjustment to the new context, discrimination and offence on the part of both British and Bangladeshi men, arranged marriage) the reflection on orality and on language in general plays an essential role. Monuara Badsha’s piece entitled “Twenty-First of February” poignantly explains the importance of language for each person of Bangladeshi origin and it is concluded in this significant way:

With much strife we have regained our country, Bangladesh, and our language, Bengali. History has no record of any other people who have had to shed so much of their blood and make such sacrifices for the sake of their language.

Also the English language, however, is the subject of a poem by Debjani Chatterjee entitled “To the English Language”.

By means of an interesting food imagery, Bengali is described as a “sweet and juicy”, “rich and spicy” (90) language, whereas English, the “barbed lines” of the volume title, is associated with the “frozen soil” of its grammar, which the writer has the firm intention to “reap”, to master, thus claiming the status of “step-child” of her second mother tongue. This poem is also very meaningful because it fully acknowledges and highlights the valuable contribution that Bengali/ Bangladeshi immigrants have given (and continue to give, also through their story-telling) to the complex texture of the British society: “[English], I do not come to your rhythms empty-handed/ — the treasures of other traditions are mine,/ so many koh-i-noors, to be claimed”.

Food is also the primary theme of *Sweet and Sour* (1993), in whose title both the mixed feelings towards the new

³ Personal correspondence, June 21st, 2007.

country of settlement and the strong ties with Bengali and Bangladeshi cooking traditions can be detected. In this case, as it is clearly shown on the volume cover, in which a woman is portrayed with a spoon in the left hand and a pen in the right, both activities of cooking and story-telling aim at the same goal of building bridges from “home to home” thus signifying the importance and value of the women’s contribution. The stories deal with the initial difficulty to adjust to the “cold” English climate, with the differences between the food in England and in Bangladesh, with food linked to the memories of the writers’ homeland, with ill health and lack of appetite; however, problems are often solved and the imbalance is overcome through mouthwatering recipes which often foster a mix between “East and West”, as in the case of the stories entitled “Marrow Leaf Magic” and “Oats Khichuri”, where eastern and western ingredients and cooking practices are meaningfully fused by women in “healing” recipes, often shared with the rest of the Sheffield community. The book was meaningfully published on the 8th of March, international women’s day and, as it is effectively remarked in the “Foreword”, the efforts of the BWSG are directed towards opening channels of communication that can promote peace and understanding:

As we write this foreword, we join our sisters the world over in celebrating International Women’s Day. We also commemorate the centenary year of Sheffield, a multi-cultural city to whose achievements we are proud to contribute, and we link with sisters and brothers around the globe in making 1993, the centenary of the World’s Parliament of Religions, a “Year of Interreligious Understanding and Cooperation”. (11)

The discourse that the “Bilingual Book Project” has so far developed reaches its apex in the 2003 anthology entitled

Daughters of a Riverine Land, composed after a trip that all the women of the group took together, in 2002, on the Sheffield River Don, in a historical moment heavily affected by the aftermath of the attack against the World Trade Center and the build up of the Iraq War, that would break out some months afterwards, in the same year in which the volume was published. As Debjani Chatterjee and Ashoka Sen, the editors of the collection, point out in their introduction “To the Reader”, the rivers play a very important part in the molding of Bangladeshi history, culture and identity, being Bangladesh the largest wetland in the world. As they remark, thus tightly linking the idea of *language* with the icon of the *river*, “along with our beautiful Bengali language, it is also our rivers that have given us a sense of our being one people” (9) even beyond territorial borders, since the same rivers flow in the sister countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. Just like the Bengali language, the river flows without being constricted or confined, it is sacred in Bangladeshi culture (as it was in the ancestral cultures of Britain), it brings food and life (through its floods and the consequent silt, and through fishing) and it seems to establish a *global* network of communication, not simply from the land of origin to the new land of settlement. Just like the “*mother*”-tongue, rivers are connected with femininity since, as Prema Salt, one of the storytellers, informs the reader, “in a language where neutral nouns are not ascribed a gender, rivers are exceptions, and most take the feminine gender” (21). Language, oral histories, rivers and femininity, become intimately linked with one another, almost *standing* for one another in their nurturing, creative power. Strikingly enough, the birth of this anthology was prompted by an experience shared on a Sheffield River and, even more remarkably, the rivers mentioned throughout the work do not belong to Bangladesh and England only: the Nile, the Hwang-Ho, the Ganga (called “the Mother” — 49)

are mentioned, as if the writers wanted to remind the reader that we live in *one* planet, whose “pulsating veins” annihilate geographical distances in their constant flow and mobility.

This anthology, published in such a critical historical moment, could therefore be read as a wish, on the part of Bengali British and Bangladeshi British women to achieve a wider opening, to finally *break the silence*, thus overcoming the boundaries of communities, cities and nations and, following the sinuous movements of a river, embracing world peace.

At the end of 2004, the “Book Project” was turned into a publishing house called “Sahitya Press”, being “Sahitya” the Sanskrit word for ‘literature’. The last bilingual anthology, *A Slice of Sheffield* (2005), shows a further development of the “Bengali Women’s Support Group”’s central idea of communication and opening towards the rest of the community, namely the cooperation with other ethnic associations (“Sheffield Roshni Asian Women’s Resource Centre”, “Kala Kahni Writers”, “Pakistani Muslim Centre”) in order to offer, as it is remarked in the introduction “To the Reader”, “a tribute to the proud heritage of [their] adoptive home” (9) — Sheffield cutlery industry — while celebrating, at the same time, their own traditions connected with kitchen utensils. The volume, sponsored by “Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust”, was actually commissioned to commemorate the purchase of the “Bill Brown Collection of Historic Cutlery” and, as it is pointed out in the “Foreword”, such a volume, stemming from the storytelling and then the writing of Sheffield citizens of Asian origin, is capable of redressing an imbalanced situation: the “predominantly European focus” (9) of the collections exhibited at the “Millennium Galleries”.

To conclude, quoting a poem by one of the contributors, Rashida Hassanali, entitled “East and West”, in a truly

multicultural society that aims at real communication and peace, “an English teaspoon and an Indian *chamchee* should complement one another” (15).

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Stato Italiano.

The Carla Rossi Academy Press Index
viene inviato annualmente a biblioteche
e istituti universitari specializzati
negli
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e in Argentina, Australia, Brasile, India,
Messico, Nuova Zelanda, Sud-Africa.

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in formato elettronico
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Finito di stampare per conto della
Carla Rossi Academy
International Institute of Italian Studies
nel mese di Aprile
MMVIII