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## 2 LOCATION AND RELOCATION: HOME, 'THE FIELD' AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL ETHICS (SYLHET, BANGLADESH)

Katy Gardner

As all pre-doctoral students of anthropology are aware, fieldwork – usually in some far-flung location – is the discipline's centrepiece, the ultimate transformative experience through which they must pass if they wish to call themselves anthropologists. Amongst my fellow neophytes at the LSE (1986) we approached this great experience with a mixture of romantic expectation, heroic self-image and utter terror. What we were all certain of (and none of our ritual masters disabused us) was that whatever happened, so long as we stayed the course, we would come home fully-fledged members of an elite group, having completed the greatest academic initiation rite of all. Our training reiterated this. Exposed in our pre-fieldwork seminar to the tales of various post-fieldwork initiates, we gradually understood that within anthropological epistemology, knowledge is generated and validated through individual experience. Far more important than learning the appropriate interview or survey methods was the act of doing, of being there and letting the local culture permeate our individual boundaries. To put it crudely, we were taught that the way in which anthropologists learn is by going native. In this chapter, I wish to update this romanticised version of anthropological transformation. What I hope to show is that rather than the relationship between our transformative fieldwork experiences and the texts which result from them being lineal (what we learnt during fieldwork determines what we write), it is in fact far more complex. This is partly because what and how we learn is endlessly influenced by our personal locations and identities, which themselves change over time. It is also because anthropological learning is not bounded by the temporal boundaries of being in

the so-called 'field'. To support my argument, I shall draw from recent debates within postmodern critique and feminism.

Anthropology has of course had its fair share of postmodern castigation. One area in which it has been criticised is the claim of so-called 'objective generalisation', or what Jonathan Spencer calls 'ethnographic naturalism' (1989:153-4). This confers authority on the anthropologist by suppressing the historical specificity of the ethnographic experience; the experiential nature of data collection, which is so much part of private anthropological lore, is left out of the public end-product. If we are to meet the postmodern challenge, we therefore need to describe the historical specificity not only of the people who we write about, but also of ourselves. (For a classic exploration of these issues see Clifford and Marcus 1986.)

The importance of locating the author in her or his text has now been accepted by most anthropologists and is virtually a literary convention. This is an important step forward, but often simplifies the anthropologist's own identity and position. I, for example, would present myself in terms of various characteristics (female, white, middle-class, etc.) from which particular assumptions would then be made. The premise of this is first that race, gender and class are more influential in my positioning than other characteristics (the list could include any number of random characteristics, such as age, educational background, sexual preference, voting behaviour, and so on), and secondly, that these characteristics can be read like a map reference (if I am white, middle-class, etc., I am therefore located between points Y to Z). This issue has been particularly discussed and analysed within feminism. Before considering my own fieldwork experiences, I shall therefore make a short digression, and outline some of the key issues which have arisen from postmodern feminism.

#### FEMINISM AND THE REVISED POLITICS OF LOCATION

Just as being there confers authority on anthropologists, so is personal experience the key to feminism. Rather than separating this from their writings however, feminists have always celebrated the personal. For many first-wave feminists, women's experience of oppression was core to their subsequent consciousness raising, and the basis of their new political identities. As Visweswaran has commented, feminism 'locates

politics of location - everyone is differently oriented = no universality = danger to essentializing identity to fixed locations in history/culture.

the self in the experience of oppression in order to liberate it' (1988:29, quoted in Mackey 1991:5). Crucially, these experiences were understood as shared. Belief in the universal subordination of women and their international sisterhood was thus, for many, a central tenet of their feminism.

This assumption of shared experience was to lead to increasing self-criticism and fragmentation as over the 1970s and 1980s the movement became aware of difference, at first in terms of sexuality, and then later in terms of race (Mackey 1991:2). The critiques tore at the heart of Western feminism; it was accused of generalising from what were essentially white and middle-class experiences, of ethnocentricity, and of appropriating black women's voices. Some argued that white feminism's attempts to represent Southern experiences helped reproduce neo-imperial power relations, and thus colluded and collided with orientalism (Mohanty 1988).

As a response to these criticisms, by the late 1980s what has been called the 'politics of location' became increasingly influential. This involves the recognition that everyone writes from specific locations, and that the ways in which we learn and experience have particular temporal and spatial dimensions (Probyn 1990). Thus, there can be no homogeneous, universal feminism, for all individuals have different locations. Here then, it is difference which is highlighted; such ideas have obviously been heavily influenced by postmodernism.<sup>1</sup> The politics of location have however led to a new set of problems, for they often assume an automatic relationship between experience, identity and political position. Identity politics are thus in continual danger of essentialism: individuals are assumed to represent particular groups whose cultural and political locations are presented as fixed and bounded. They are also often heavily prescriptive, dictating who can and cannot speak. They may be used to argue, for example, that dialogue can only take place between women who share the same identity. In other instances, they may mean that the authentic voices of women of colour are heard, whilst those of white privilege are silent. Both of these situations are highly problematic (see Mohanty 1990; Mackey 1991).

Identity is of course far more complicated, for individuals possess many identities, none of which are fixed. This, plus the rigid oppositions implied by what Mackey has called a dynamic of 'authentic voice/privileged silence' (Mackey 1991:5), have led to a revised politics

of location within feminist thought. In this, location is understood as multiple and always changing; individuals are placed on shifting ground where no single identity is possible. Instead, personhood is endlessly fragmented; we have permeable boundaries and are endlessly transformed in each new interaction. The positions one speaks from are located in and contingent upon specific contexts. The researcher and her informants are both changed, and agents of change.

## ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE REVISED POLITICS OF LOCATION

Similar issues exist in anthropology. To avoid essentialising an anthropologist's identity, or assuming its coherence, we can demonstrate how our own personhood is multiple and at times contradictory. It is continually changed, both through the ethnographic experience and in interactions before and after. Anthropology is thus not simply about specific discoveries (although these may be important), but is more processual, building upon lessons which begin before the intrepid neophyte arrives in the field, and long after she or he has left. As Nancy Lindisfarne has written:

The logic of a post modernist position means that the sense and authority of any new ethnics [sic] of anthropology can only be derived from self-critical analysis of the micro-politics of all interactions ... not only those of the anthropologist in the field, but those at home before and after fieldwork. (1994:6)

Rather than presenting fieldwork as bounded in space and time (my experience in the field), and the anthropologist as trapped in the static identities of before and after her or his transformative experience, it is therefore more constructive to understand it as an ongoing process, for each anthropologist's relationship with her or his experience is continually changing, just as we continually change as individuals.

In what follows, I am therefore not going to describe an experience or revelation which changed the course of my fieldwork. Indeed, when I tried to recall such an experience I realised that there was no single revelation which made everything clear. Instead, I wish to focus on how my understandings of my fieldwork have been altered through my own changing political, personal and intellectual locations. I also hope to indicate the relationship of these to various ethical problems.

I have been particularly forced to consider these issues both because of the nature of my research topic, and because I have produced three distinct texts from my ethnographic experiences: a book of short stories, my PhD dissertation and its completely rewritten incarnation as an academic text. Each of these represents a different phase in my relationship with the place where I did my fieldwork (a village in north-eastern Bangladesh) and a different type of understanding. This process of change encompasses not only my first and longest stint in the so-called field but also subsequent periods in Britain, and the various times which I have returned. In what follows, I shall explore these issues by discussing two particular issues: purdah and migration. The latter, in particular, has embroiled me in various ethical questions, which have invariably been closely interwoven with my particular positioning.

## FIELDWORK: A BACKGROUND

I did my fieldwork in a village in Greater Sylhet, Bangladesh, over 1987 and 1988. As an undergraduate, I had taught English to a Bangladeshi woman and like most of the British Bengali population, which then included around 100,000 people, she came from Sylhet. I therefore decided to live in a village in Sylhet and study the social and cultural effects of prolonged overseas migration. In preparation for my visit, I worked for about six months as a volunteer for a community centre in Spitalfields, London, and through various contacts met a number of British Bengali community leaders. During this stage, I was located within the represented British race relations, in which the British Bengali community is discussed largely in terms of racism, victimisation and exploitation. I did not problematise my own position, or my research plans, but assumed that eventually, I might use my experience in a positive way in the UK.

Once in Bangladesh, I was lucky to find a place to work in relatively swiftly. Talukpur is a small village of 70 households in Nobiganj, one of the areas in Sylhet which send migrants to Britain, to the Middle East, and increasingly, to the US. I moved into a large homestead consisting of four patrilineal households. Two of these were in Newcastle, and the others were present. My adoptive family were of high status, but owned only a small amount of land. As I quickly realised, most households with migrant members were considerably more

prosperous than those without. There was therefore increasing economic polarisation in the village, for the main way in which people could move upwards was to work abroad and earn foreign revenue. In this sense, migration is a highly valued economic resource to which people continually struggle to gain access. In general, only those with a certain amount of capital or pre-existing contacts on the migrational network ever got the opportunity to go abroad.

I stayed in Talukpur with my adoptive family, to whom I became an honorary daughter, for 15 months, give or take breaks in Dhaka. Occasionally I went to Sylhet Town and got drunk with the local VSO workers. In the village, I worked from an agenda of questions, which generated more issues to follow up. I carried these in my head from household to household, repeating the same questions, memorising people's answers, and at the end of the day, writing down everything I had heard. I tried to visit all the households in the village regularly, but inevitably spent more time with some than others. Originally I took notes during my conversations, but for reasons I'll discuss below, soon decided that it would be better to be less explicit and simply memorised what people told me. Later on in my fieldwork, I tape-recorded interviews and the oral histories of particularly keen informants. I also wrote down everything that happened. My supervisor had assured me this should fill about six pages of A4 a day. On some days, I confess, I could only muster half a side.

As with all anthropologists, my relationships with my informants changed and developed over the period I was in Talukpur. Throughout my stay I was in a variety of roles, often all at the same time. I was, in varying degrees with different people and according to context, a white European (thus of high status), a possible spy, a young, unmarried woman, and a fictive daughter, sister, niece, auntie, etc. Certainly, my role as researcher, which was never very clear to start off with, either to me or to my hosts, became more and more blurred. If I was to be part of things and truly accepted, I increasingly sensed that I could not also be a researcher; it felt too detached and too hierarchical. Possibly I tried too hard to conform and thus swept the research carpet from beneath my own feet, for how could a village daughter go around interviewing people and writing things down in her book? Towards the end of my stay I became increasingly paralysed in my formal research role. Needless to say, it was in the very last months of fieldwork, when I stopped asking direct questions and everyone knew that I was

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leaving, that I learnt most. These roles have changed further on my return visits to Talukpur in 1990, 1993 and 1994. I am still an honorary daughter in name, but am obviously less close to everyday affairs than I was; possibly I may be drifting into being a patron; certainly, I am no longer a PhD student taking notes and carrying around a tape recorder.

## PURDAH AND GENDER

The approaches of Northern feminists to social institutions such as purdah (the veil) have been central targets in the critiques of first-wave feminism I alluded to earlier. Southern intellectuals such as Chandra Mohanty have argued that Western feminists make ethnocentric assumptions about purdah, and in presenting all veiled women as passive victims, uncritically promote their own culture and position (Mohanty 1988). In some instances this has certainly been the case, but it is also important not to essentialise the positions of so-called Western feminists. Personally, I do not have any one view on purdah. Gender relations in Talukpur have continued to confuse, challenge and infuriate me. In this section I intend to chart the relationship between my experiences in and out of Talukpur, my changing locations and my ethnographic understandings.

When I arrived in Talukpur I had a fairly straightforward view of purdah. Veiling was the tool of patriarchy; it subordinated women, whilst giving vast privilege and power to men. This attitude was partly the result of previous personal experiences travelling in the Middle East and South Asia. It was also strongly reinforced by the existing literature on gender relations in Bangladesh. Until recently, this has almost wholly stressed Bangladeshi women's oppression, what has been called a 'litany of grim statistics' (Arthur and McNicholl 1978). As Sarah White has argued, the majority of this literature has been funded by aid agencies whose priorities hugely influenced the subsequent research agendas. The problem of Bangladeshi women is thus given centre stage, whilst other aspects of gender relations are ignored (White 1991). I must confess that before I arrived in Talukpur I assumed that the women I met would envy me. If possible, my presence might awaken their latent feminist consciousnesses.

During my relationship with Talukpur, much has confirmed my original assumptions. If I chose to work in a Muslim society partly out of a desire to venture into the heart of the alien other there was, and is, much in Bangladesh to satisfy my voyeurism. One of the first things I was told in the village was: 'Women's heaven is at their husband's feet.' Women are denied entry to all male domains (the mosque, the market, the fields and the village council). In Muslim law, one man carries the weight of two women, who are legal minors. Within rural areas they also have very few rights, despite the official laws made in Dhaka. Their children, for example, belong to their husband's lineage and if they are divorced, they often lose them. Women are defined by, and dependent upon, men. Many of the married women who I knew were nameless, labelled through their relationships to men, as so-and-so's wife, or so-and-so's mother. At marriage, the bride's behaviour wholly symbolises the passive submissiveness of stereotypical rural Bangladeshi women. Heavily veiled, she does not even walk without the assistance of her female kin. Later, in her in-laws' house, relatives and neighbours flock to view her, lifting up her veiled face to take a look and then commenting on her relative fairness. In none of the marriages which I observed did brides have any choice in who they were married to. Ostensibly, at least, they present their husbands as their future masters, whom they must obey and please in all respects.

I could continue my description. This chapter is not, however, about the subordination of Bangladeshi women, but of how my understandings of local gender relations changed over time. Let me start with my physical experience in Talukpur, for one of the most important ways in which I learnt about Bangladeshi women was through my own bodily transformation. As I was quickly to learn, constructions of Bengali femininity are inscribed first and foremost on the body. This has been described by other female outsiders working in rural Bangladesh. Kotalova, for example, writes of how her body was examined by local women when she first arrived in her fieldwork village and then transformed by them as they taught her their own bodily codes. As she suggests, the ambiguity she posed presented a challenge to their own identities and assumptions about femininity (Kotalova 1993:28-34; see also Ram 1991).

My first lessons in Talukpur were also of a physical nature (see Gardner 1991). For my hosts, it was imperative that I become a proper woman, and I was rigorously instructed as to how this might be possible. My

body learning  
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hair was oiled and tied tightly back, glass bangles pushed onto my wrists, my fingernails stained with henna; most importantly, I was instructed to change my *shalwar kameez* (baggy trousers and tunic, worn by young girls) for a sari. From now on, my head should always be covered, especially when the *azan* (the call to prayer) was sounded from the mosque, or in front of elders. I should walk slowly, rather than stride or run, and sit only in certain positions. I should be smooth, neat, and demure: this was a sign of acceptable femininity. In contrast are women who lack the appearances of control. Their hair is loose and wild-looking; their saris are not properly tied, and may even hang open; their heads are uncovered, and they talk too much, a standard criticism of unpopular women. Those that truly stand at the margins of civilised society may even wander, with uncovered heads, into male domains. These mad women (*pagoli beti*) are the subject of much amusement and horror in Talukpur, and when I did not conform – when my hair was too frizzy, my sari rode up over my ankles, or I walked into male domains with an uncovered head – I was jokingly accused of being a *pagoli*, or a small child, that is, I could not be a fully formed adult for I had not yet been socialised into the correct social codes. This changed over time, for as I stayed longer in Talukpur, I began to get away with what I assumed to be deviant behaviour. In the hottest months, for example, I stopped wearing a blouse inside the boundaries of the homestead, concealing my chest with my sari, but leaving my back bare. To my surprise, no one objected, perhaps because I had already satisfied my hosts that I had mastered the basics.

There were other ways in which I learnt about Talukpur through my body. I developed, for example, a taste for *pan*, which women chew endlessly. When hungry, I found myself craving rice. This is of tremendous symbolic value in rural Bangladesh; by imbuing the substance of the locality through its food people are said to become linked to their homelands. It is only local rice, fruit, fish, and so forth which are seen as truly nourishing and tasty. My appetite for rice, then, indicated that I was slowly picking up the bodily mannerisms of the people I was with. In comparison with the often tense way in which we in Britain deport ourselves, and our notions of the need to exercise and use our bodies, these express more a state of relaxed indifference. I found too, that my use of Bengali, again reflecting the linguistic mannerisms of local people, was seeping into my personality. In

Bengali I am more abrupt, more extrovert and more assertive. In short, I began to feel my whole identity change.

These bodily experiences were not, however, simply a matter of learning a physical role and playing it like an actor, whilst remaining unchanged inside. Instead, personhood and physical experience are more intimately connected. As Marriott and others have argued with reference to South Asia, bodily substance and cultural behaviour are inseparable; each is a realisation of the other (Marriott 1976, cited in Kotalova 1993:64). Thus, just as wearing a suit might make some people feel more formal and restrained, after an initial period of awkwardness, my sari, oiled hair and bangles made me feel more demure and feminine. Slowly too, and perhaps partly because of this, I began to feel the first inklings of *sharam* (shame). This is a powerful cultural norm in Talukpur, and whilst not exclusively experienced by women, is largely associated with them. *Sharam* carries meanings of modesty, shame and embarrassment, according to different contexts. Whilst it is often caused by external events (such as a man unexpectedly appearing, before a woman has a chance to cover herself), it is also an internal state for women, for their bodies are constructed as inherently impure. All signs of fertility and sexuality must therefore be covered and hidden.

These feelings were not caused simply by wearing a sari, but also the result of being constantly reminded to cover my head in male company, and of being with women who would rush to hide themselves as soon as a strange man appeared. (Only certain categories of men evoke women's hasty removal from the scene. Landless labourers, beggars, or men too young to marry do not merit such behaviour.) Such is the power of socialisation that after about six months in the village I instinctively began to pull my sari over my head in front of male elders. Increasingly too, the three-mile walk over the fields to the nearest road, which at first I had insisted on doing alone, became more and more difficult due to my growing awareness of just how extraordinary my behaviour was. Even when chaperoned, I took to covering my face entirely with my umbrella. On one memorable occasion, I forgot to take this with me, and then had to walk through the male domain of shops and tea stalls to reach my destination. That I was horribly aware of the censoring eyes of village men as I hurried past indicated to me not only the power of social sanctions, but also the permeability of my own cultural boundaries. In another instance, I amazed one of my VSO friends in Sylhet. Sitting and chatting in his

bungalow one evening, we were interrupted by the arrival of his Bangladeshi counterpart. As the employee of a progressive NGO, with experience of working with foreigners, there was no reason why I should feel compromised by this young man's presence. Instinctively, however, I ran into an adjoining room before he could see me, much to the hilarity of the VSO.

What this told me, of course, was how quickly my identity and position could change in different cultural locations. I was, and remained, a non-Muslim woman from Britain, with strong feminist sympathies. But instead of this automatically fixing me in a particular position, the ground on which I stood became increasingly slippery. Rather than possessing a homogeneous self, I was fragmented: drinking whisky one moment, and in my confused state rushing into self-imposed and inappropriate purdah the next. I am not trying to claim that my sense of *sharam* was the same as other women in Talukpur. All foreigners in rural Bangladesh attract large crowds, often composed entirely of men. Being stared at is not a particularly pleasant experience, and day after day becomes extremely tiresome. My tendency to cover up whenever I left the village, and was thus once more a stranger, was partly a practical solution to the problem of being foreign, rather than being a woman.

Combined with this, I manipulated purdah and used it to my own advantage, often in ways which would not be possible for insiders. It was, for example, the perfect excuse not to talk to the frequent male visitors who would come to our homestead, request to meet me, and then subject me to endless questions, often ending in an oppressive attempt to convert me to Islam. It meant too, that I could demand male help, when in other contexts I would have to manage alone. Errands could be run by my younger brothers, for example, and there would always be somebody to help me carry my bags on my trip to the road. If one has dependable male kin and is from a wealthy household, purdah can feel very comfortable. From this viewpoint, based on my own experience and observations of the women around me, women in Talukpur are not simply the victims of a harsh representative cultural code. Instead, I began to see how some might gain certain benefits from purdah, and the advantages of being relieved of the burdens of freedom.

Combined with this were the attitudes of the women themselves. Contrary to my expectations, they did not envy me; some even

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seemed to pity me. None embraced feminism in the way I had naively anticipated, although many expressed dissidence indirectly – 'We're of lower status than men, but more intelligent'. All confirmed that men were indeed hierarchically placed above them and possessed more power, for this was the rule of Allah. Rather than seeing purdah as a form of subordination, they mostly presented it to me as a central part of Islam, which was for many the most meaningful thing in their lives. To question this meant questioning God. I am wary of generalising, but suggest that most seemed to accept the outward, public presentation of gender, whilst working in a variety of contradictory and even subversive ways within the framework. As Kotalova (1993) has argued, we need to distinguish between the encompassing structure of social codes and the ways in which, within the encompassment, dissidence and negotiation take place.

Indeed, as time progressed in Talukpur, the tables turned and I began to find that rather than village women envying me for my freedom, I envied some of them for their security. For a young woman, in an economically comfortable and loving family, life is in many ways easier than for young women in Britain. None of the women I knew had to face the insecurity and uncertainty of forging their own destiny. They may have had little independence, but it is the family rather than the individual which is celebrated in Talukpur, and as time progressed I began to wonder if they may not in fact be right. Increasingly, whilst perhaps not intellectually acknowledging it, I began to emotionally appreciate why a culture which constructs women as in need of male care and incapable of independent decisions may not be wholly negative for those who have male support. Certainly, our British insistence upon individual freedom and choice began to appear almost as strange to me as it did to my hosts, whose statements such as 'In your country everyone is separate from their families, and alone' I found hard to refute.

My new understandings were not, however, static. They have changed over time and according to where I am, and my writing has reflected this. For example, my book of semi-fictional stories, some of which I had already drafted when I left Talukpur at the end of 1988, probably reflects my most subjective and emotional response to this apparent transformation. However, the story did not end there. I continue to reassess my view of gender relations in Bangladesh. Each time I return, I see things differently. This is partly because my personal

boundaries have been rebuilt. As people told me in the last weeks of my fieldwork, 'Now you're going to make yourself into an English woman again' ('tumi ekhan Inreji beti banabe'). I no longer feel like an anthropologist in Talukpur, and thus am less tolerant of purdah. I feel freer to argue with my ex-informants. Since I now only visit for very short periods, empathy is also less crucial in maintaining the web of relationships and legitimacy on which the continuation of my work originally depended.

More importantly, I have witnessed changes in the lives of women that I have known for seven years. As their lives unfold, my own interpretations of gender relationships in Talukpur shift. Indeed, the male support I was reassured of in 1987/88 seems an increasing myth. Perhaps most influential in this change in my perceptions has been the fate of my closest friend in Talukpur, whose husband, when I first met her, was working in Saudi Arabia in 1987. She had been married about three years, but had only been with her husband for one month of this, and was childless. She was staying in her father's home, awaiting her husband's return. By the end of my fieldwork it was becoming clear that there were problems in the marriage. The husband had stopped sending letters, and relations with her in-laws were distinctly chilly. Since then, the marriage has completely broken down. When, after five years away the husband returned, he declared that in his absence my friend had grown too old for him, and he intended to take a second wife. She would have to find another path in life. For the vast majority of rural women in Bangladesh, marriage and children are the only respectable path in life. My friend, now approaching 30, and childless, was ruined. To make matters worse, the head of her lineage has not so far allowed her to divorce her husband, which would enable her to take him to court to claim her *kabin* (money set aside for the wife as marriage settlement in case of divorce) and give her some financial independence, for it might damage the status of the lineage, and hence his own political career.

My outrage at this has reconfirmed many of the views which I held at the beginning of my fieldwork, and which began to slip throughout it. But paradoxically, my writings on gender have moved in the opposite direction. When I wrote my thesis in 1989, I did so mainly within the subordination of Bangladeshi women discourse. More recently, and coincidental with my discoveries of postmodern critiques of anthropology and Western feminism, I have been at pains not to

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label Talukpuri women as victims and have attempted to be more detached, to stress the processual aspects of gender, the diversity of experiences and meanings, and so on. My subjective feelings and my academic analysis are therefore in constant danger of contradiction. This personal problem is echoed by the recent debates within feminism which I discussed earlier.

As Chandra Mohanty (1988) has argued, to interpret South Asian gender relations and institutions such as purdah solely in terms of inequality and female subordination negates individual agency, homogenises women's experiences and presents them as a single and wholly victimised category. If female informants refuse to recognise social and religious codes as subordinating, if they appear to accept their social roles, and indeed, make strenuous efforts to persuade the anthropologist herself to follow their codes of behaviour (from covering her head to Islamic conversion and even an arranged marriage), then surely describing them as subordinate (and hence in a state of mystification) is deeply patronising? Rather than attempting to locate overall, systemic structures of subordination, as embodied by notions such as patriarchy, a postmodern approach would focus more intently upon individual experience and agency, and the specificities of local and historical context. It may also problematise the writer's own position, even to the extent of denying her a voice because she is not an authentic representative of the correct group, and thus, since there is no universal female experience and no universal women, she cannot speak for the experiences of the other.

These postmodern correctives are undoubtedly important in their recognition of diversity, and in pointing out the dangers of homogenisation, and the hegemonic categorisations of many Western-centric discourses. The difficulty with them is, however, that in other senses they are inherently depoliticising, for if everything is fragmented into endless diversity, it becomes virtually impossible to talk of structures of inequality, exploitation or subordination. As others have pointed out, too, the assertion that so-called white or Western women have no right to speak about experiences other than those ascribed to their particular characteristics, is highly dangerous and likely to lead to the wholesale collapse of feminism. Writers such as Nicholson have therefore suggested that there must be postmodern stopping points and that gender is one such point (1990). Each time I return to Bangladesh I become more convinced that this is correct.

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The challenge facing all anthropologists who hope to produce politically committed work is thus how to write about diversity without apparently undercutting such stopping points. To insist that there is no single view of Bangladeshi women, or of purdah, for they, like the anthropologists, are continually in different roles, and continually changing, is a start. Likewise, we need to recognise the various levels at which social norms work, from encompassment (Kotalova 1993) to the manipulation and negotiation of overarching structures. This explains the various contradictory messages which I received: women should be covered, modest, passive and so on, but there were also many ways in which they implicitly deviate, and work within the rules. In other words, it is not enough merely to see the explicit and external symbols of women's subordination (the veil, official laws and norms) and assume that there is no more to learn. These lessons do not mean that we are unable to take up political positions, but we must also recognise that these positions are not fixed. The challenge, then, is to continually reevaluate our own locations, with renewed sensitivities to both our own fluidity and that of the people we discuss.

## MIGRATION

If writing about gender has inescapable political implications, writing about migration is even more fraught. The migration of Sylhetis to Britain involves very real political issues, both in terms of state policy – immigration law, council housing allocations and so forth, and the racism many face in Britain. The ways in which they are portrayed are thus particularly important and, understandably, many British Bengalis are tired of their misrepresentation by outsiders. I have therefore had to step through a potential minefield. Before discussing these directly I would like to describe some ways in which I experienced this sensitivity and how my anthropological reactions to it have both been informed by my pre-existing locations, and in turn influenced those locations.

Many people in London warned me that Sylheti migration would prove to be a difficult research topic. I understood these warnings in two ways: as evidence of how relevant my research was, and as a methodological challenge. Since I did not plan an exposé of illegal immigration, I also thought that such advice was probably alarmist. It

is worth noting that at this stage I was solely interested in the problems posed by my forthcoming experience. I did not consider I might face problems after completing my initiation; I had only considered the ethical problems of data collection – for example, does one pay one's informants? – not the ethical problems of what I would do with my data (and certainly not whether I should be collecting it in the first place).

Following the advice of my supervisor, the first thing I did in Talukpur was a rough survey of the village, visiting every household and asking who lived there, who was related to whom, and so forth. If I was told that members were abroad I enquired where they were and how long they had been gone. These questions, in addition to the basic fact of my presence, led most people to conclude that I must be a British High Commission spy. Given that the BHC's immigration officials regularly carry out what are termed 'village visits', in which they arrive unannounced in migrant villages to check up on the details of immigration cases, this was entirely rational. That I was asking 'when did you last see your father?'-style questions also did not help; neither did my regular absences in Dhaka.

I realised that I was generally thought to be a spy very gradually, by the vague hostility of some people, and the advice of my adoptive family, who remained loyal to me throughout. Some men directly challenged me, asking what I was doing and whether I could prove it. I had a letter from my university stating I was a student, but I doubt this did much good since no one could read English and the letter could have been easily forged. I said that I was student, learning from them so that I could write a book; I am sure that for most people this cut little ice. These fears indicated to me the central importance of migration to people's lives and the extent to which they fear, often for good reasons, the immigration authorities. Moreover, as I will explain shortly, it has deeply affected both the content of my work and my relationship to it.

So far, my unease was confined to my relationship with people in Talukpur and the need to convince them I was not a spy. After about four months, however, things developed in a different direction. On a visit to Sylhet Town, I was introduced to one of the many social workers, teachers and community activists who visit the area from Britain. When I explained to him what I was doing he became very aggressive, telling me that whatever I ended up writing could only

harm the Sylheti community in Britain; even if I did not intend it, my work would be used by racists against Sylhetis. He also insisted that all research was a waste of time and self-indulgent.

This experience was extremely distressing to me, but it did raise my awareness of the sensitivity of my work and the need to write extremely carefully. Perhaps then, it was no bad thing. Likewise, it was no bad thing that I embarked on my fieldwork so naively. If I had started it knowing what I know now, I doubt if I would ever have collected the basic survey data I did in my first months. This data has been invaluable, and since originally a sister from my household accompanied me on the visits to give me introductions and assist me in understanding the Sylheti dialect, it later proved to be largely correct. To this extent, ignorance was bliss.

Migration has therefore caused a variety of methodological, ethical and theoretical problems in my work, which I have attempted to solve in different ways. My reactions to these problems and solutions are closely intertwined with my particular political and geographical positions, which, as with the issue of gender, have been continually fluid. Methodologically, the local sensitivity to discussing migration meant that I changed direction. I stopped using my notebook, and generally disguised the extent to which I was recording things. I also spent more time than I had to with women, for they were far more welcoming, and less threatened by my presence. Centrally, I stopped asking about migration and only followed lines of enquiry which I thought would prove that I really was studying Sylheti culture. I therefore learnt about Islam, about local saints (*pir*), and healing, which people were happy to share with me. I was terrified of enquiring about land ownership and remittances, and most of my data in these areas was acquired indirectly (slipping the question into a conversation about something else, asking neighbours how much another household owned, and so forth). In some ways this has been an advantage rather than a weakness. Migration is all too often discussed only in terms of political economy. In my work, I have tried to understand its cultural and ideological meanings – these may have escaped me had I focused only on its economic effects.

However, whilst depoliticising my actual fieldwork, these methodological solutions have led to new problems in my post-fieldwork task of writing. Whilst conventional socioeconomic analyses of migration would be politically neutral in Bangladesh, writing about Islam has

ethical  
problems  
hidden

made my writing far more sensitive. Indeed, in the Bangladeshi context, Islam is the most loaded subject of all, even whilst in the village it was what people wished me to understand. Combined with this, my solution of concealing the extent to which I was recording data in Talukpur has meant that my fieldwork was highly top-down. It was not remotely participatory; although I told them I was writing a book, I did not tell my informants what I was planning to put in it. They have therefore had no forum for correcting me or putting alternative points of view. I realise that this is quite normal for anthropological research. Indeed, the theoretical complexity and rarified language of much anthropological discourse effectively excludes most informants, even if they could read English. It is an aspect of my work, however, which, whilst solving my fieldwork problems, leaves me profoundly uneasy in my role as a writer.

But as I was to realise on returning to Britain, far more pressing than the problem of anthropological exclusivity are the ethical issues posed by the main topic of my work: migration. Again, as a fieldworker, I had not clearly thought these through. These problems exist on several levels, the first of which is practical and the most easily solved. Clearly, I have had to censor my work. There are some things which I simply cannot write about, for if I did, it might directly endanger my informants and their families. This has remained unchanged in the various versions of my work. At the second level are issues which would not damage anyone directly, but might be used against the Sylheti community in Britain. The issues of housing and arranged marriages between London and Bangladeshi partners are two examples. Again, I have tried to exercise caution, although most of my data indicates the discrimination of British immigration law rather than the swindles of would-be migrants.

The next level is less easily solved. Overseas migration and its effects look different according to where one is geographically situated and politically allied. In the context of Britain, the British Bengali community is economically, culturally and politically subordinate. Especially in the context of recent political events in East London, anthropologists attempting to write about British Bengalis therefore have a responsibility to avoid replicating negative stereotypes or fuelling racist arguments. Before my fieldwork, I was located within these discourses.

In the Bangladeshi context, however, things look rather different. Migrant households are clearly the elite in rural Sylhet. They are

migrants are subordinate in GB but are the elite in Sylhet + exploit the system w/ it.

often large landowners who employ many servants and live in large, pukka houses. If there is exploitation to be found – and Bangladeshi society is frequently characterised as one dominated by struggles for scarce resources and hence deep-rooted exploitation and corruption (see Hartman and Boyce 1983; Jansen 1987) – it is often perpetuated by successful migrants against non-migrants, who are almost invariably poorer and less politically powerful. From the outset, I have been interested in power relations. I did not want to write a thesis which dealt only with the cultural construction of personhood or symbolic codes. This has meant that issues of local differentiation and exploitation have been unavoidable for me. But should I write something which might reflect badly on an already beleaguered British ethnic minority?

The extent to which this question has worried me has largely depended upon my geographical position, and the audience which I am writing for. Whilst doing my fieldwork, I was located within the context of Bangladeshi, where it is virtually impossible to ignore poverty, inequality and the exploitation of the powerless by the elite. Indeed, nearly all of the anthropology of Bangladesh focuses upon these very issues (see, for example, Hartman and Boyce 1983; Arens and van Buerden 1977; Jansen 1987). The immediate academic product of my fieldwork – my thesis – thus dealt with the ways in which migration had changed local structures of power, and was key to the elite's manipulation of their cultural, economic and political dominance. This was written whilst emotionally at least I was still in Bangladesh. I had not fully engaged in anthropological literature beyond relevant South Asian ethnographies and the anthropology of migration. I was also secure in the knowledge that very few people would ever read my thesis. The immediate problems of representation were thus minimal. In my non-academic book, which I hoped might have a slightly larger readership, I chose not to write at all about migration to Britain in an attempt to dodge the issues. This was easy to do since the book's format was a collection of semi-factual stories which were based on my personal experiences.

While rewriting my thesis into a book, I have had to face these issues directly. I am also fully relocated in the British context. Although my book is primarily about Bangladesh, and not the Bengali community in Britain, my audience will be first and foremost British. I have therefore had to balance the need to be politically sensitive to the dangers of racist misinterpretation, my desire not to offend Sylheti readers, and

my anthropological responsibility to be as true to my data as possible. I do not know if I have succeeded in these aims, and clearly it is impossible to please everyone. Various new approaches, which I only learnt of in returning from Talukpur have, however, helped me move some way forward.

First, I have not claimed that my version of Talukpur is either objective, or definite, and have used the now-routine technique of placing myself in the text as much as possible. Secondly, in stressing diversity and flexibility, rather than an overriding system one is less likely to homogenise or essentialise local cultures. Thirdly, I have found it more fruitful to focus upon individual agency and dynamism, rather than systems of exploitation. This leads me to my final point, which is that my relocation has been theoretical as well as physical, political and emotional. This, like my changing interpretations of gender, has been affected not only by doing fieldwork over a fixed time, but by returning to Talukpur.

My original analysis of migration was dominated by the available literature on development in Bangladesh (for an interesting discussion of this, see White 1992) and theories of migration produced in the 1980s (Meillassoux 1981, Castles et al. 1984, Cohen 1987). In both of these literatures, neo-Marxist notions of dependency and post-imperialism are key. Labour migration, like other flows which have taken place from colonised Southern countries to the North, must be understood first and foremost as a form of exploitation, in which value is extracted, and capital accumulated in the North, and the costs are borne by the South.

From these ideas, I argued that overseas migration from Sylhet could also be understood as a form of dependency. Along with other analyses of South Asian migration (for Pakistan see Ballard 1987; for Bangladesh, see Islam et al. 1987), my prognosis was therefore generally pessimistic. Migration increased local incomes for the elite, thus widening economic differentiation and making it harder than ever for low-income households to compete. It was also an extreme form of dependence. Not only was travel to *bidesh* (foreign countries) culturally constructed as virtually the only route for economic success and enterprise, but many households were financially dependent upon the remittances of absent members. I suggested that as in Britain at least, the British Bengali community became increasingly established, these would dry up, whilst in Bangladesh the villages' need for foreign

revenue, like that of the national economy, would continue. Whilst benefiting individuals then, in the long term overseas migration would not benefit Sylhet.

Subsequently I have completely rethought this original analysis. This partly reflects the contemporary rejection of meta-narratives such as dependency theory within academic discourse, plus discussions of globalisation and the possibilities which these might provide for the anthropology of migration (see, for example, Hannerz 1992). Lastly, and most importantly, however, it reflects my return to Talukpur, which I revisited in 1993, after three years' absence. The first thing I noticed as I approached the village was the extent that, within this time, things had changed. The number of pukka houses had risen dramatically and many houses were currently being built. Combined with this, there was a new secondary school which had not existed in 1988. In 1997, what was the dirt track to the village is now a tarmac road and electricity has arrived. During my last visit I also noticed several agricultural changes: an increase in mechanisation amongst the larger landowners, and an increase in deep tubewells. My work has not focused upon agricultural development, so I should add that this observation is mostly impressionistic.

Most importantly, however, some of the households which had previously been in a pitifully poor state, had now significantly improved their economic position, often through the canny investment of remittances from the Middle East. Two of these landless households had new houses, and one had started a profitable tea business. This does not mean that overall poverty has decreased, for a large number of in-migrant landless households have been settled on government land by the local authorities. What it does suggest, however, is that within the social and political boundaries of the village, migration cannot be interpreted only as a cause of dependency and stagnation. Nor are migrants passive victims, tossed this way and that by the vagaries of the international labour market. Instead, they are highly dynamic. Again, I got a vivid sense of this in 1993, when I was told that since migration to Europe was difficult, new opportunities were now being sought in the Far East. Whilst dependency theory goes some way in explaining some of the structural conditions of Bangladeshi overseas migration, it therefore fails to indicate the dynamism and agency of migrants and their communities.

labor migration =  
exploitation of  
south by north  
BUT ALSO  
south takes  
revenue back  
to its own  
economy

## CONCLUSION

My changing relationship to my data, both during my fieldwork and after it, throws up a variety of more general issues. The first is that the epistemological assumption of anthropology, that we are simply objective conduits for our data, is clearly deeply flawed; for what and how we know is endlessly influenced by our various shifting locations. Rather than being passive conduits for the data, we are proactive in choosing what we learn and what we write. To suggest that anthropologists need not worry about political or ethical issues because their first duty is to academic truth therefore borders on irresponsibility. Instead, what we learn and what we write is unavoidably subjective, because we are all located in particular political positions. As I have also suggested, our learning does not end when we finish our fieldwork, and there is therefore no definitive account of it.

My account also indicates that the ethical issues encountered in the field often appear in a different light at home. Topics which are neutral in one context are therefore sometimes highly charged in another. This has been a particular issue for me because the people I am writing about are also living in Britain where their political and social position is very different. Combined with this, researching and writing are different acts and throw up different problems. For example, my learning about Islam was seen by my hosts as wholly positive. Publishing anthropological analyses of local Islam has, however, been fraught with political dangers, especially in post-Rushdie Britain, where much of the popular representation of Islam is virulently anti-Muslim. The much-publicised case of Taslima Nasreen, the Bangladeshi feminist writer, has also made commentary on gender relations within a Muslim village in Bangladesh highly sensitive.

Lastly, I would like to suggest that what we experience in the field has a direct bearing on our relationship to the anthropological endeavour and our reactions to postmodern critiques of it. The fears and suspicions which my presence evoked have also, I think, changed my relationship to my own writings and to anthropology. For a phase in my fieldwork I became acutely paranoid about what people thought of me. I was terrified that I would meet direct hostility, or even aggression, and would not be able to continue. More profoundly, the experience of being held in suspicion and not always being welcome is deeply

unsettling. Discussing these issues with friends who did fieldwork with people who welcomed their enquiries, and who were vociferous in their desire to be written about, I realise that postmodern critiques of anthropology have fewer emotional resonances for them than for me.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the issues which I chose to study are particularly sensitive. Although painful, in the long term this has been no bad thing for it has forced me to confront some important ethical dilemmas, not only in the doing of fieldwork, but also in writing it up. What I have tried to describe in this chapter is how over time my dynamic relationship with Talukpur has affected me personally and intellectually. Likewise my various and changing positions and identities have altered the way in which I have approached the village, on both an intellectual and a personal level. These relationships are continually changing. Only in writing do they appear to become concrete and set; perhaps that is why it is such a challenging business.

## NOTES

1. The fragmentations implied by postmodernism, and its insistence on endless difference have led some feminists to worry that it may lead to the movement's self-destruction (see Nicholson 1990; also di Leonardo 1991:24).
2. To a degree, my own qualms are unfounded, for what people were afraid of was that I would give to the British High Commission details which would lose them their immigration cases, not that my representations of them would be a form of cultural imperialism. Many people enjoyed telling me their stories, and today seem pleased when I show them my book.

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