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# Performance Ethnography & Islam: Abstracting Thoughts in Performance

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**Abstract**

We have used performance ethnography method to understand Islamic identity in the world of Islamophobia in the context of Bangladesh. Findings show that the art performance is able to abstract critical topics and allows fluid discussions.

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**Author Keywords**

Performance ethnography; Islamophobia; Identity.

**CSS Concepts**

• **Human-centered computing** ~ **Human computer interaction (HCI)**;

**Introduction**

A religious identity as a Muslim remains personal while it has other implications. There are perceptions on people based on the outlook which can have further impact when Islamophobia is emerging [1, 2, 3]. Recently, a performance ethnography<sup>1</sup> [4] conceptualized by Bangladeshi dance scholar, our corresponding author, with interlocutors, both performers and non-performers - all Bangladeshi Muslims and known to the investigator - was presented at a theatrical venue in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Performance Ethnography takes into consideration “the representational politics at work in performance, as a reflexive, embodied epistemology, a way of knowing self, culture and others, as the negotiated collaboration of representing fieldwork in performance” [7]. ‘halaqa refresh.com’ is an auto-ethnographic performative narrative, created with the collaboration of all interlocutors/informants, where their stories converge with the ethnographic fieldwork. The narrative has

<sup>1</sup> halaqa refresh.com’ was presented on October 18, 2019 at the ‘Natmondol’ of the University of Dhaka under the aegis of Shadhona – A Center for Advancement of Southasian Culture. This is an ethnographic project where performance is the mode for enquiry. It is a ‘work-in-progress’.



Figure 1: The participants bonded as a team



Figure 2 (up): The design process had structure and fluidity (down)Some of the stories and discussions were intense

Table 1: Participants and roles

Roles	Person in Charge
Principal Investigator	Lubna Marium
Artistic Direction:	
Theatrical Direction	Shamim Hasan
Musical Direction	Nirjher Chowdhury
Participants (Performers)	Arthy Ahmed, Shammy Akter, Rehana Haque, Lubna Marium
Participants (Non-performers)	Nova Ahmed, Zebun Ahmed, Hafsa Siddiqa, Farzana Sharmin, Sayra Binte Rafiq Aman

been expanded with a dialogical performance with the purpose of embodying an in-depth understanding of multi-layered engagement with the *target community* within this "intimate, dialogical performance" [8].

Stories of religious identity explored how some families forced ideas on individuals, which had long term implications towards a path of self-discovery; for some, a religious attire was only a means of protection from a conservative region of the city, whereas others looked at it, as a means of answering questions, through religious philosophy. The performance, presented in the form of storytelling, allowed critical ideas to be shared, through artistic abstraction.

### Related Work

Existing work that merges recent Islamophobia and HCI focuses mainly on Arab region [1, 2] where major focus is on research relating to refugees and Arab spring. We focus on a South Asian country of Bangladesh. We have used performance ethnography [4, 7, 8] to abstract the problem statement through performance as well as to engage the participants in critical thinking and formation of a plot. The experiences become part of the story creation itself through the continuous engagement of participants. Abstraction of the personal experience required abstraction to protect the identity of the participants as well as the thoughts that links to individuals directly since there has been brutal attacks on open discussions on Islam [5, 6].

### Methodology

*Participants:* We had twelve participants and the roles of them are presented in Table 1. Participants were all born and brought up in Muslim families and were

contacted through snowball sampling of the corresponding author.

*Sharing:* The participants with non-performing background were given the choice to actively participate in the performance or not. They had the option of their stories to be shared through their own performance, or imparted second-hand by the regular performers, stylization of stories they had shared beyond the curtain. All the stories thus gathered did not end up in the final performance ethnographic sketch. The final decision, of what to retain and what to perform, from among these stories, was thus a combined decision. The group discussions are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2; the performance is presented in Figure 3, Figure 4 & Figure 5, respectively.

*Storytelling:* Participants initially shared their stories around the topic of identity and Islam. It later continued towards the topic of how Islam influenced their lives in different ways. The stories were not recorded. The participants kept sharing stories from different angles and different formats, over the course of designing the performance.

*Designing the Performance:* Performance ethnography technique, allowed the participants to share their stories, and thereby design a performance, over the course of meetup sessions that took place over a week. The participants initially engaged in various group activities for ice breaking. It involved some local game playing, which required everyone to move around the space. On the first day, all shared stories with diverse emotions. After the first two days, the participants worked on the theme of the performance. They wanted to focus on the concept of *love* being present in all the



Figure 3: Performance of halaqah refresh.com



Figure 4: Audience was at a close proximity of the circle sharing stories



Figure 5: Participants answered queries of audiences after the performance

stories. The discussions led the participants to feel a need for increasing understanding about religion, rather than basing life decisions on blind customs, which sprung from male-dominated interpretations. On the last two days, the performers worked on a short dance performance, a continuing drama, in between which, other participants shared stories and insights. The story of a girl sent to an Islamic School was unanimously decided to form the starting point, which evolved with discussions from various aspects having few dance performances in between.

### Findings

*Sharing Difficult Journeys:* The whole performance ethnography journey was a process of sharing views, during the design of the story telling process, leading to certain conclusions. One participant became emotional sharing the journey of difficult family problems, where religion was used as an extremely successful outlet. However, the journey was difficult for a participant, grew up in a conservative area, she used to cover herself up under the veil, to avoid comments from people in the neighborhood. There were mixed opinions about religion, for and against. However, for the story telling, all could not be included in the performance, considering the comfort feel of the participants. The decision was taken to focus on a story of one participant, who had been sent to an Islamic School against her will, during two years of childhood. She experienced strict rules of uniformity, and often exposed to intolerance towards non-Muslims, which confused her existing belief system of loving and caring for others as a Muslim. She was moved out of that school with the help of her grandmother, and was away from Islam for a while. In the later phase, she wanted to search for answers of many of her queries and she

discovered Islam through knowledge. This individual search led her to love and practice Islam, and it was a story which was repeatedly emphasized in the performance, that we women should look for the answers to many of the life questions, ourselves, rather than depend on male-controlled society to inflict man-made laws on us. We experienced burst of emotions during the design phase of the performance in negative ways as well as positive ways.

*Performance and Abstraction:* The performance abstracted the stories in the form of questions to each other, more in the form of a conversation, and follow up discussions, debates followed by insights of Quran from the two who had some knowledge of the Islamic scripts. The strong stories with negative emotions remained in the performance with dramatic effect, queries, silence and responses. It allowed many queries to be asked, discussed in an artistic format. The audience was engaged in a question-answer session, which went on for more than an hour beyond the performance itself.

### Discussion

Islam, identity and its impact is a complex topic to discuss in Bangladesh. There have been attacks on individuals who have criticized religious blindness [5, 6]. There is a constant fear of being attacked, judged and misrepresented, when Islam is introduced as a topic. The problem becomes more complex when Islam is used to justify patriarchal practices for women. The concept of performance ethnography was introduced by a dance scholar, who wished to understand how Islam defines identities on individuals, particularly women. The artistic form of sharing a story, as opposed to directly sharing a story in a performance, enabled

individuals to share stories without fear of being personally misunderstood or misrepresented.

Our work during the discussion sessions, on stories about controversial issues, were shared only within the selected group, while the actual artistic abstraction at the theatre was conceived a public performance. At the end of the day, despite starting from very different ideas about the topic of identity for Muslim women, all the participants seemed to agree about a few issues: That religion per se was not harmful for anyone, and could be used as a positive force in one's life. That religion had been interpreted by a male-dominated society, which made it difficult for women folk in general and therefore the need was to increase women's involvement in interpreting religion as a whole.

The participants all felt at the end of the day that performance ethnography as a technique could be used to interpret diverse cultural and social issues. These topics may seem volatile at first glance, but become manageable and understandable as the exchange of storytelling between participants can be used to bridge the gap between controversies which can be used as a design tool in similar contexts.

### **Conclusion**

We have used the technique of performance ethnography where participants participated in storytelling and developed a performance that discusses their identity and concerns around Islamic practices taking place in Bangladesh. Our performance showed the potential to discuss and resolve critical topics, through the abstraction of art. Our study can be useful for studies taking place about critical topics or

vulnerable communities, where voices must be heard, without identifying individuals, and providing the required abstraction.

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