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## The path to happiness? Prosperity, suffering, and transnational migration in Britain and Sylhet

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SPECIAL ISSUE COLLOQUIUM

## The path to happiness?

### Prosperity, suffering, and transnational migration in Britain and Sylhet

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In this article I discuss the relationship between migration and happiness via the life stories of members of a Bangladeshi family who for several generations have been involved in transnational migration between their rural home in Sylhet and a city in Northern England. Rather than to seek definitive answers concerning whether or not migration makes my interlocutors happy—as we shall see, the answers to this are highly subjective and ever changing—my intention is to ask what we might learn about both migration and happiness by considering how journeys purportedly undertaken in order to increase well-being so often lead instead to sadness, loss, and dislocation. In particular, I use Sara Ahmed’s framing of “happiness projects” to address the contradictions and ambivalence that lie at the emotional heart of transnational migration.

Keywords: migration, Bangladesh, happiness, *Londoni*

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*People between two countries always feel sorrow. Mothers and fathers worry about how their child is doing in another country. The child sometimes finds happiness. From the Bangladeshi point of view they are sleeping in a big bed, eating chicken and wearing expensive saris. But some only feel pain, like when a chilli is rubbed into your flesh: a burning pain like that.*

—Mrs. Khatun, London, 1996 (cited in Katy Gardner, *Age, narrative and migration*)

While it is axiomatic that migrants move in order to improve their lives, attracted by “pull factors” such as economic opportunities, modernity, freedom, and so forth, research drawing upon metrics of well-being implies that it does not lead to



happiness for those who leave (Bartram 2010, 2011; Nowok et al. 2011; Graham and Markowitz 2011), those left behind (Borraz, Pozo, and Rossi 2008), or those who return (Bartram 2013). Ethnographic accounts point to similar conclusions: migration is associated with upheaval, rupture, and longing.<sup>1</sup> Popular stereotypes support these findings, presenting a picture of sorrow, separation, and loss, or what Sara Ahmed calls “the melancholic migrant” (Ahmed 2010: 121–59). In this article I shall explore these contradictions, drawing upon my research among transnational migrants in Britain and Bangladesh, which I have been carrying out since the late 1980s (Gardner 1995, 2002, 2008, 2012a). Rather than to seek definitive answers concerning whether or not migration makes people happy—as we shall see, the answers to this are highly subjective and ever changing—my intention is to ask what we might learn about migration in particular and the human condition in general by considering how journeys purportedly undertaken in order to find happiness so often lead instead to grief, longing, and dislocation.

Within Sylhet, Bangladesh and its transnational fields in Britain, migration’s contradictions are palpable. That the majority of migrants to Britain, or *Londonis* as they are known, have been successful in achieving a better life for their families appears to nonmigrants to be obvious. Their large houses, well-fed bodies and consumer goods are testimony to the local dictum that if one wishes to prosper, migration is the only way forward. But does this prosperity lead to the contentment that the nonmigrants imagine? In my research *Londonis*’ accounts of their lives are filled with loss and conflict. Since my doctoral fieldwork in Sylhet in the late 1980s I have revisited my research village many times, as well as conducting research in London with British Bengali elders and children (Gardner 1995, 2002; Gardner and Mand 2012; Gardner 2012a) and have been privileged to see these contradictions play out over peoples’ lives. Although migration is passionately desired and imagined as *the* route to a better life, the reality is more ambivalent, both for those who go and for those who stay behind (Gardner 2002, 2006, 2008). So what goes wrong? Is it that people are inherently bad at predicting what will make them happy, as suggested by some psychological research (Gilbert 2009); is migration simply a *bad choice*? Or are more complex processes at work?

One way to answer this is to think of migration as a “happiness project” (Ahmed 2010). By doing this we shift attention from the ways in which migration leads to material prosperity to its emotional implications. This discursive shift is also made in Sylhet, where as I describe below, people talk about migration in terms of the happiness it is assumed it will bring (*kushi*) rather than in strictly economic terms. This is not simply because for the very poor happiness and contentment are not possible without material security but also because *bidesh* (foreign countries) have assumed an almost mythical status in Sylhet, which transcend mere economic success. Combined with this, as Ahmed argues, happiness can be understood less as a measurable emotion and more as “a wish, a will, a want” (Ahmed 2010: 2). Rather than seeking to describe what is at best a fluid and elusive state of being, Ahmed suggests, social scientists might profitably think of happiness in terms of what it *does*. By becoming associated with certain objects or projects, “happiness shapes

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1. See, for example, Rytter (2013); Salih (2003); Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997); Baldassar (2008); Parrenas (2005); Charsley (2013).



what coheres as a world” (Ahmed 2010: 2); it is a state that is anticipated rather than actual, “a question of following rather than finding” (2010: 32). As individuals, we therefore face choices or paths that we believe will lead to happiness, the promised end point of our journey. Such perspectives chime with work in the growing field of “happiness studies” (Thin 2012), which stress how happiness is often imagined as a future state, rather one experienced “in the *now*.” As Daniel Gilbert wittily puts it, “our brains were made for nexting, and that’s just what they’ll do” (2009: 191 / 4847 kindle). Thus, while a vast literature addresses immediate and practical ways to become happy (for example, Paul Dolan’s 2014 book *Happiness by design*) the human tendency is to imagine happiness as something that will take place in the future.

From this, the relationship between migration and happiness becomes more complex than the simplistic causality inferred by economics and metrics. After all, the difficulties of working out what factors cause happiness in happiness research are legion (Thin 2012: 110). We also face the problem of how to evaluate emotions and well-being as reported by interlocutors, both in the present and in the past, for as we shall see, people have a tendency to forget or misreport how they feel or felt. A related difficulty is what is meant by “happiness,” a question that continues to dog philosophers, theologians, and psychologists, not to say anthropologists (Thin 2012; Johnston et al. 2012). What exactly is happiness, and how do we know if others have it, or *are* it? As Andrew Beatty has argued, anthropologists struggle with interpreting and conveying emotion across cultures (Beatty 2010, 2005).

Although I cannot solve such problems here, in what follows I take Ahmed’s concept of happiness as a promise and project as my starting point, considering how the project of happiness via migration is worked on, experienced, and lived by different people, in different locations across transnational space and at different stages in their life course. The question then becomes not so much “what are the outcomes?” but “what does this particular happiness project *do*?” By treating happiness as a project—an enterprise that projects people into the future—we focus on how it is imagined and the routes taken in order to reach it, both over the life course and over space. Migration is particularly interesting in this context for the project is not only spread over time (“I will meet the man of my dreams” or “I will lose weight”) but also over geography (“If I go to that place I will be happy”). It is, literally, a mapping of the future, in which particular states of well-being and affect are like contours on the map: *here* are the lows, and *there* are the highs. Or are they? As we shall see, while the project of geographical movement brings my interlocutors closer to prosperity, economic opportunities, security, and improved social status, these do not necessarily lead to long-term contentment or happiness.

So how to unravel the contradictions? And what about the tricky relationship between well-being (the promise of migration) and emotion? As Joel Robbins suggests in this volume, these may be quite different. One way forward is to focus not only on what is promised by migration but to interrogate the values that underlie the project and then link these to associated emotional states. After all, not all happiness projects are the same; they depend on cultural and historical context and are underpinned by specific values (romantic love, aesthetic ideals of bodily perfection, for example). Returning us to classical theory, Robbins asks how commonly

held values are associated with human flourishing and the relationship between the quest for a good life and the emotions it produces. As he reminds us, Durkheim argued that effervescence is produced when social values are collectively performed. If family togetherness is an important value, for example, then a meal or family party will produce effervescence. But since in any society there are plural values we are left with the thorny problem of what happens if and when these clash or contradict each other (Robbins, this volume).

By considering the values of happiness, I suggest that some of the difficulties faced by Bangladeshi migrants and their families result from the fundamental contraction of a happiness project aimed at the flourishing of the group (migration) and based around the core value of prosperity, which clashes with another core value: familial togetherness. In what follows, I refer to states of being that Bangladeshis call *kusi* (happy), *santi* (peaceful), or *bhalo jibon* (good life). These are discursively opposed to *kostor* (suffering) and *chinta* (worries). As we shall see, while core values are deeply implicated in what people report causes happiness—familial togetherness and economic prosperity are both central—these states, and the degree to which particular values are enacted are also influenced by where people are in their life courses as well as their gender, not to say where they are geographically (Gardner 2002). It is not simply that values that are successfully enacted produce eudaimonia and at times effervescence (analytically separate states of being that are both encompassed by the emic use of the term “happiness” or *kushi*). It is that, as Ahmed stresses, the process is temporal: to get to the promised happiness takes time and may involve other emotions and states of being. As others have noted, migration can involve considerable hardship but is aimed at a payoff at the end (Jackson 2013: 131; Lucht 2013). We must also distinguish between the supposed beneficiaries of the project: is it the individual or the group? In what follows we see how individuals pay for the good of the group by their suffering. Here, the primary objective is the longer-term well-being and prosperity of the family mapped onto a real and imagined geography of good places and good things. As we also see, the suffering of individuals is temporal; a migrant to Britain may face loss and yearnings for home, but over time these feelings subside. Similarly, his mother might weep for him but feel great satisfaction at the improvements to her farm that his remittances have brought. As always, ambivalence lies at the heart of the migrant experience.

In order to illustrate these processes I discuss a Sylheti family who, like many of their neighbors and relatives, has relentlessly pursued migration as a path toward familial prosperity. Through consideration of their stories, I hope that we might learn not only of the deep tensions and contradictions that transnational migration brings but also how “the promise of happiness” helps order peoples’ relationships to places and their movements across the world.

### Transnational migration and the promise of happiness

While happiness per se is rarely evoked, the literature on transnational migration is animated by plenty of hope, ingenuity, and innovation, as well as melancholia and nostalgia. While originally much work in the 1990s interrogated political processes,



nation building, and citizenship,<sup>2</sup> other research has examined the processes of kinship across transnational space, pointing not only to how relationships are ruptured but also how they enable transnational movement, are remade across space, and the narrative and ritual work involved (see, for example, Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Chamberlain 1997, 2011; Olwig 2007; Shaw and Charsley 2006; Gardner and Grillo 2002; Gardner 1993; Abranches 2014). A growing body of work focuses on questions of care, both for elders (see Gardner 2002; Baldassar 2008) and children (see Parrenas 2005; Schmalzbauer, Verghese, and Vadera 2007; Olwig 1999; Coe et al. 2011; Gardner 2012b). Here, the stress tends to be on separation and loss, the difficulties of long distance intimacy, or its lack. Rhacel Parrenas, for example, has charted the damage done to children left in the Philippines by their migrant mothers (2005), while in *Global woman* Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild describe a global economy of emotion in which love and care are drained from the South to the North, to the benefit of privileged children and their families in the metropole and to the detriment to those left behind in the now emotionally impoverished South (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003).

If so much is put at peril and so much emotional work is required in threading together geographically distant lives and papering over the cracks in intimacy, care, and love, why migrate? While the primary reason is usually economic—people from poorer countries migrate in order to find work—evidence from around the world indicates that once a pattern of movement between two or more countries has been established, locations on the transnational map can assume symbolic roles, signifying relative success or failure, happiness or despondency, onto which aspirations concerning a better life, modernity, or progress might be mapped (cf. Vertovec 2010). People also move between the different locations in order to create and recreate family relationships, provide care, or charity, (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002) or to educate their children (Zeitlyn 2012, 2015; Gardner and Mand 2012). To understand these complex motivations more fully, let us turn to Sylhet, where the role of *bidesh* (foreign countries; overseas migration) in shaping peoples' life chances as well as their emotional horizons cannot be understated.

### The promise of migration in Sylhet

Although within Bangladesh as a whole the role of international migration has become increasingly important to the economy, Sylhet has a special history of connection to foreign countries, in particular Britain. Indeed, whether or not one is a *Londoni* has become the main arbiter of wealth and status (Gardner 1995, 2008). From the beginning of the twentieth century, men from Sylhet traveled to Calcutta, where they found work as seamen, or *lascars*. Chain migration meant that soon particular villages and areas within Sylhet had established networks of migration. Most of the ships went to the London Docklands, where some of the men jumped ship. By the 1940s, a small group of pioneering Sylhetis was working in the kitchens

2. For example, Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc (1994); Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton-Blanc (1992); Fitzgerald (2000); Ong and Nonini (1996); Georges (1990); for an overview see Vertovec (2010).



of London's hotels and restaurants. These men formed a bridge head for the much larger group, who were to arrive from the 1950s onward as industrial workers, hired to assist in the postwar reconstruction of Britain. The connection between Sylhet and Britain was so well established that by the 1960s a section of the British High Commission was established there.

By the time I did my fieldwork in the late 1980s the signs of successful migration were ubiquitous. *Londonis* had bought up most of the local land and were building big houses. Chain migration meant that new geographies of *Londoni* villages had arisen: particular *gustis* (lineages) as well as villages had high numbers of *Londonis*, and were far wealthier. By the time of my fieldwork, patterns of landholding in Talukpur, the village where I worked, showed that those who originally migrated to the United Kingdom had risen to the top of the socio-economic hierarchy, while those who hadn't tended to lose land (Gardner 1995). Over the intervening twenty-five years the inequalities have become increasingly explicit (Gardner 2009, 2012a). While large and dominant lineages capitalized on the opportunities and have irregular donations (or both) by UK relatives in times of need (Gardner 2012a). Although agriculture remains important to the local economy, those that work the land are usually nonmigrants from low-income households. As has been reported elsewhere in Asia, more prosperous or middle income households have tended to withdraw from agriculture, leaving it to laborers or sharecroppers (Hall 2012; Jeffery 2010). This leaves few options available for young men from prosperous rural households. Like their counterparts studied by Craig Jeffery in India, they spend their days in "time pass," hanging around and waiting for their futures to materialize (Jeffery 2010). Some become "business men," running shops funded by their *Londoni* relatives (Gardner 2008; Gardner and Ahmed 2009). A minority aims for higher education and a profession. The majority aim to migrate.

Nowadays migration to the United Kingdom is largely only possible via the marriage migration of sons and daughters (Gardner 2006, 2008). Failing that, there are other destinations. Within the local culture of migration places are arranged hierarchically, with the old and established at the top: the United Kingdom, the United States, and occasionally destinations in Northern Europe, and other destinations in the Middle East, South East Asia, or South Africa beneath. The possibilities for long-term settlement and the degree of economic opportunity are the main factors that make different destinations more or less attractive. While it is relatively easy to gain a contract for the Middle East, for example, settlement is out of the question, and however hard one might work, the economic opportunities are limited by legal restrictions on foreigners owning businesses or property. For others, illegal migration is the only possibility: either to the Middle East, or taking one's chance and facing the huge risks of arduous and dangerous journeys West or East. The risks are substantial. Indeed, it is not unusual for households to sell all their land in order to fund a member to migrate only to find that the *dalal* (agent) has cheated them, providing false papers or in some cases providing nothing after disappearing with their money (Gardner 1995, 2012a).

Within this context migration seems to be the only way to get on in life. While translated literally as "foreign countries," *bidesh* has become laden with implications not only of economic prosperity but also long-term happiness. "Take me to London!" people exclaim when they meet me. Women proffer their children, men



their services as drivers or housekeepers. “Why do you want to go there?” I ask. “Because it is beautiful (*shondur*),” they say, or “I will be happy (*kushi hobe*),” or “It’s peaceful (*santi*).” In what Steven Vertovec has termed a “transnational habitus” (Vertovec 2010: 69) it seems hard to imagine paths to happiness or well-being that don’t involve traveling abroad. “This place is full of suffering,” (*anek kustor*) they tell me, “people are poor” (*manoosh garib*). In contrast, *bidesh* is good, and getting oneself or a family member there, by hook or by crook, is deeply desirable: the path to happiness is, quite literally, the path to *bidesh*.

There is more to the adulation of *bidesh* than money. Aspirations and the desire for status figure large. Returning *Londonis* and their British-born children and grandchildren arrive in their home villages in the role of patrons, their bags filled with gifts not only for their immediate relatives but also the many people who they help to support. Their modern consumer goods, whether electronic gadgets and smart phones, nappies, ground spices, televisions, or globally branded clothes and cosmetics, all indicate a life of ease and style. They are people on the move, sophisticated and educated, with lifestyles that those left behind can only dream of. Their houses exemplify the dream. Two- or even three-story mansions, with palatial pillars, large walls, bathrooms with showers, and Western toilets, they could not be more different from the houses of most nonmigrants: mud and thatch dwellings without sanitation. Paradoxically, while for those in the *desh* (home), *Londoni* houses signify all that is good about *bidesh* and are sites for dreaming of the good life, many of their owners live in far less glamorous homes in the United Kingdom. British Bangladeshi children on visits to the *desh* find themselves treated as high status visitors, living in palaces and playing in swimming pools (referring to the large ponds that are shared among households in family compounds) a far cry from the cramped council flats where they live in (Gardner and Mand 2012; Mand 2010; Zeitlyn 2012). Indeed, as we shall see, the reality of life in Britain is often very far from how it is imagined from the vantage point of Bangladesh. South Asian migrants to Britain experience the paradox of upward mobility in Bangladesh at the cost of downwards mobility in the United Kingdom, working multiple shifts in restaurants and taking up a lowly social position in British society, with its embedded racisms and exclusions (Charsley 2005).

Migration is thus more than an economic project. It is seen as a pathway to long-term well-being and status, a happiness project par excellence. The promise of migration is everywhere in Bangladesh: images of Tower Bridge, airplanes, and Big Ben depicted on the sides of CNG scooter taxis and rickshaws, English language schools going by the name of “Oxford” promoted on walls and hoardings, or fast food outlets named “London Fried Chicken.” The promises are so vivid for young men with few other opportunities: go abroad, preferably to Britain, find work, and make money; reach a state of understanding and knowledge and become cosmopolitan, wealthy, and sophisticated. Put simply: while losers stay put, winners move.

### Contradictory values of happiness

*Bidesh* and *London* are therefore not simply places, they are also projects that give a geographical expression to a core value in Sylhet: prosperity and profit (*laab*). To



be enterprising, to profit in one's dealings and speculations—whether in migration or business—is a key aspiration for men. Indeed, as others have also noted, migration is closely tied to projects of masculinity in South Asia (Osella and Osella 2000). According to the narratives of older Bangladeshi men living in London in the late 1990s, for example, a successful man provides for his family, accumulates wealth, and is cosmopolitan (Gardner 2002). In my research with Bangladeshi elders in East London in the late 1990s the men's stories were organized around particular tropes, which pointed to migration as the route for becoming fully adult, worldly, and wise. Their stories often emphasized how they got lost during their first days in the United Kingdom, but then found their way, moving from ignorance to “understanding,” how their lives were dominated by work and how important it was for them to provide for their families (Gardner 2002: 77–81).

Wealth (*doni*) and prosperity is materialized not just in business ventures or money but also the fertility of the land, vividly described as golden (*shonar*). Women as well as men take great pride in familial prosperity, materialized in by beautiful and expensive (foreign) saris and jewelry at weddings, but also by the fecundity and flourishing of their homestead land. In a fifteen-minute long video, taken on my phone to show to her sons in Britain, Amma walked me around her *bari* (homestead) pointing out the improvements that had been made with remittances from the United Kingdom: a large pond stocked with fish and surrounded by bean plants, a new cow, a much improved water pump that was noisily supplying water to an area of *iri* rice, and the new broiler farm.

If prosperity is a key value then its performative enactment, the event in which effervescence is generated, is the cooking and serving of huge meals, using home-grown ingredients. As I have described in earlier work, food from the *desh* is strongly valued by British transnationals for its spiritual and emotional connotations (Gardner 1993; see also Abranches 2014). Social media is used today to transmit images of the riches of the land. For example, I frequently receive pictures of fish, jackfruit, and rice fields, sent to me on the messaging app Wassup by family members in the *desh*. Likewise, photos are posted on Facebook by the British contingent of the elaborate dishes they have prepared for special occasions in the United Kingdom. But rather than simply displaying these riches, it is the entertaining of guests, and their consumption of the food in both *desh* and *bidesh* that causes real pleasure. A visit to family in the North of England will involve a huge meal, attended by as many members of the family network who can fit around the table and prepared all day by the family women, who watch with approval as men, guests, and children tuck into piles of rice, Bangladeshi fish, chicken and lamb biriyani, shabji, and so on (the women will eat later). The same is true for the village: when guests come, no holds are barred in the preparation of the feast.

If meals enact the value of prosperity they also enact the value of togetherness and connection (*Shompoko*). When are you happy? I asked my friends in both Bangladesh and Britain; “when everyone is together,” I was told. A large and busy household embodies the value of togetherness. Even if women sometimes complain of things being *too* busy, being alone is to be warded off at all costs. Here we arrive at the contradiction that exists at the heart of migration's promised happiness: to become prosperous one must migrate. But this means leaving people behind. Moreover, since families were reunited in the United Kingdom in the 1980s,



the extended family is spread over both places. Complete togetherness is thus never feasible. Rather than the dichotomy of “home” and “away” in which migrants leave their families to go abroad, transnational Bangladeshis face the contradiction of “home” and “away” being in both places at once; despite the dreams of elders in Britain, who fantasize about returning “home” only to find themselves alienated and missing their UK-based relatives (Gardner 2002), there can be no return to a place where everyone is together.

Let us now turn to my stories. Based on my observations of and conversations with a transnational family who I have known since the late-1980s and see every few years, these illustrate both the inherent ambivalence of migration as well as how peoples’ accounts shift over time. There is no clear ending: during one meeting someone might appear to regret the migration, manifesting signs of remorse and unhappiness; a few years later they have forgotten (or do not want to remember) the earlier unhappiness. The researcher’s wish of clear outcomes is constantly confounded.

I shall start with Khaled<sup>3</sup> and his older brothers. Khaled left for the United Kingdom as a young man, for according to the local “happiness script” this was the place where he would find fulfillment and the right path in life rather than lazing around in the *desh*, getting into trouble, and achieving very little. As a newly arrived groom facing the disjuncture between places and roles in Britain, including the downward social mobility of becoming a *ghar jamai* (husband living in wife’s home; cf. Charsley 2013) he became despondent and depressed. Later, however, all this was to change. After Khaled and his brothers, I shall turn to their sisters and mother.

### The path to happiness: Khaled and his family

I first met Khaled in 1987, a cheeky, gap-toothed lad, aged about five. His family lived in what was known as “*sareng bari*” (family compound of ship foreman). The patriarch, Abdul Syed (Khaled’s grandfather) had gone to Calcutta in the 1930s; as a *sareng* he was a key figure in establishing local migration networks. After his death in the 1960s, the *bari* was divided between his sons into four separate households. By 1987, only two of these households remained. Two of Abdul Syed’s sons, who had gone to the United Kingdom in the 1970s, had relocated their families to Burnley. The third, UK-based brother had died, with his widow remaining in the *bari* with her three sons. By the end of my fieldwork this family had relocated to the United States.

Toward the end of my fieldwork, as I was preparing to go home, something surprising happened. During a visit to a neighbor I was told that Khaled didn’t have two older brothers, but *three*. “Ask Khaled’s mum about Samsun,” the neighbor urged, somewhat spitefully. “See what she tells you!” When I broached the subject, Khaled’s mother burst into tears. It was true, she said. She had not seen her eldest son since he was nine—nearly ten years ago—when he left for Burnley with his uncle. It was *good*, she added, dabbing at her tears. He would be happier there. I was

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3. All names have been changed and some details scrambled to maintain the anonymity of my informants.

aghast, not only at the collective effort of keeping such a secret for over a year, but at what it must have meant to have sent such a young son abroad. Only now did I begin to grasp the emotional implications of migration. It promised regular remittances for those who stayed behind and improved the life chances for those who left, true. But it also meant rupture and heartache: the separations of husbands, siblings, and—tragically—parents and children. Women whose husbands or children are abroad often spoke of the pain caused by these separations. As Mrs. Khatun tells us in the introductory quote to this article, it is “like having chilli rubbed into your skin” (Gardner 2002).

This pain is ongoing for Khaled’s mother (his father died in 2004), not to say Samsun. Though she insists that he was sent to the United Kingdom for his own good, according to his older sisters he believes that it was only to earn money to support his family, not for *his* happiness at all but for the happiness of those remaining at home. As one of the sisters told me, while his parents were “senseless” with grief at his departure, today he accuses them of not loving him sufficiently and prioritizing the family needs over his, and is rarely in touch. Here, we see how the “happiness script” both plays into decisions concerning movement and is used to contest it. Though his parents justified the movement of their son to Britain in terms of “happiness” (“*tumi kushi hobe*”: you will be happy), thirty years later Samsun throws it back at them. This is *not* to suggest that Samsun was “trafficked” by his parents—i.e., sent *only* to earn money for them—but rather that in their evaluation of possible futures, having a son in the United Kingdom with his uncle would bring longer-term benefits for all of them, the value of prosperity. As Jeffery has observed in India, the emerging rural middle class often prioritizes long-term future goals over short-term gains (Jeffery 2010: 4), shifting the temporal horizons as in the context of rapid global and local change. Migration is one such strategy.

Meanwhile, Khaled’s family continued their quest for *bidesh*, with its promises of happiness. By 2002, more members had migrated. Khaled’s older brother, Taj, had married his Burnley cousin and was running an Indian take away. He was getting bored and unruly, Taj tells me in 2013. He needed to have his energies poured into work and business, enterprises that could not be pursued in the *desh*. His US cousins had also left by 2002 and now manage restaurants in California. Technology changes the nature and content of transnationalism. These days everyone owns a mobile phone and the youngest generation are all on Facebook, via their smart phones. Whereas in 1987 people painstakingly wrote (or got others to write) letters to their relatives, sometimes waiting for months for a reply, now Britain and Bangladesh are routinely connected for hours. Sylheti London and *Londoni* Sylhet have become transnational communities par excellence; people are constantly moving between the nodes, marriages are arranged, money transferred, deals over property and businesses brokered.

There have been other changes. One of Khaled’s sisters, married to her paternal cousin (himself the son of a *Londoni*) has married off her oldest daughter to a professional man in Bethnal Green; by 2014, her oldest son had also married a British Bangladeshi. When I return, every two or three years, there are new babies and toddlers, aunties on visits from the United Kingdom, a different family of poor relatives living in the rooms vacated by the *Londoni* cousins. In 2004, however, Khaled was still in Talukpur. His older brother Taller was busy looking after the land, but



while he seemed relatively settled and content, Khaled, like Taj before him, was kicking around, stuck in “time pass” (Jeffery 2010). It was around this time that the family decided he should go to the United Kingdom for a “visit.” Why? I asked. “Because it will make him happy.” At the time Khaled seemed to believe this; indeed, he spoke enthusiastically of his plans. I was enlisted as a sponsor and official letters were written. The application was refused. More years passed and the quest continued. Khaled had no future in Bangladesh, the family declared; it was in Britain where he would find fulfillment. Then finally his British cousin Mumtaz agreed to marriage and after a lavish village ceremony followed by a wait for the papers, Khaled was off.

A year later I visit Burnley. Khaled has been there for six months, and I’m expecting to see him at Taj’s house. He is, however, notably absent. I meet Mumtaz, who has lived in Burnley since she was three. She’s warm and chatty but at mention of Khaled’s name she rolls her eyes. “Still in bed,” she sighs. Eventually he turns up, silent and thin. He doesn’t want to chat. As Mumtaz drives me to the station, she opens up. It is so difficult for Khaled, she tells me. The work is too hard, involving long shifts in the take-away; after a lifetime of ease in the village he is not used to it. Worse, he’s not bothering to learn English, which he will need for the citizenship test. He can’t adapt, she confides; coming to Britain was a shock, compounded by this new style of marriage to a British girl, who speaks the language fluently and knows the ropes. In sum, he’s depressed, refusing, in Mumtaz’s interpretation, to adapt and fulfill the role of successful migrant man.

Katharine Charsley described such husbands in detail in her research among British Pakistanis in Bristol. Charsley has identified men who have come to Britain to marry British Pakistani women as particularly vulnerable to depression and dejection and she has shown how the quest for migration leads in Britain to many to assuming the position of *Ghar Jamai*, (husband living in his wife’s family home; an emasculated figure in popular culture). As Charsley argues, the loss of status and perceived emasculation of being a *ghar jamai*, plus the downward mobility of migration to Britain, can lead to violence and separation in the marriages, risking the happiness of men as well as their wives (Charsley 2005, 2013).

But when I next visit Burnley, in 2013, things are very different: reminding me, once again, of how as ethnographers we must not rush to conclusions, for life continues to unfold. In the four years since my last visit, Khaled has had two children and seems much happier. Mumtaz still rolls her eyes at him, but there is little sign of his earlier dejection. Meanwhile his brother, Taj, who has been energetically building his restaurant businesses and has assumed considerable local stature tells me how coming to Britain saved him from his hot temper. He had too much energy, he says. In Bangladesh there was no good place for it to go. He is much happier here.

A few months later in Bangladesh I am told a different story by Khaled and Taj’s sisters. Neither of their brothers originally wanted to go to Britain, they say. In fact, they were pressured by their parents and extended family, who were worried at the way they were drifting and getting into trouble in the *desh*. Here, it seems, concern for the long-term well-being of these young men led to a family decision in which places were measured in terms of the relative opportunities they might provide; in the geography of well-being and life purpose, Britain was seen as a better option. To my bewilderment these new accounts contradicted my memories of what I was

told at the time. I originally believed that Khaled was excited by the prospect of migration but now it seems his arm was twisted. Given the ambiguities of migration and the mixed feelings it evokes, not to say the human tendency to misremember or even misread the feelings of others (had I assumed that Khaled wanted to migrate? Or had his sisters assumed that he hadn't?), on reflection this is perhaps not so surprising.

Let us now turn to the family women: Khaled's mother and older sisters. As my conversations with these women over the years reveal, the pain of migration is often experienced very acutely by those who stay, especially women (Gardner 1995, 2006, 2002). Combined with this, suffering in order to promote the greater good of the family is expected and even embraced as part of being a mother and wife. Indeed, it is made bearable by the promise of eventual happiness, to be experienced at an unspecified point in the future. Khaled's mother weeps every time she speaks to her sons on the phone. She worries about them continuously. Yet despite this, she still insists that migration is "good." She, after all, had wanted them to migrate; she was "senseless with grief" when Samsun departed when he was aged nine, but had agreed that this was the best long-term strategy. Indeed, although migration has caused heartache it does not mean that the family strategy of continuing settlement in Britain has failed; after all, it was she who so proudly urged me to film the *bari* with all its projects and improvements. Rather, within the transnational habitus of the British-Sylheti social field it is hard to envisage a good life *without* migration. The quest remains for happiness—for the larger group as well as the individual—via economic security and the opportunities for a better life that Britain offers. But the journey to the end point—the happiness that should be found once the migrant has successfully reached and adapted to Britain—is strewn with difficulty.

As the weeping of Khaled's mother implies, suffering on behalf of the good of others is gendered. Here, worries and stress (*chinta*) are the price paid by individual women for the longer-term well-being of their children and family, but also identify them as morally good and it is hoped that this will lead to rewards later on in this, or the after life. This distinction between happiness as a long-term project (or promise) that one journeys toward over the life course and happiness as an emotion, experienced in the present, was made to me by one of Khaled's sisters, Tulsama, in a conversation about her own life. Having left an unhappy marriage in her mid-twenties, Tulsama lives in her natal home, and is without children. In discussing another sister, who has three children, now at universities and colleges in Bangladesh and abroad, Tulsama commented how much her sister had suffered on their behalf, with *anek chinta* (lots of stress and worries) as she and her husband struggled to fund them through school, university, and so on. Tulsama, in contrast, was at peace, she told me. Indeed, over the years I have seen how she has reconciled what at first seemed to be a disaster—the breakdown of her marriage and return to her father's home—with increasing acceptance, gained partly through regular prayer and working hard within the family home. Here, the lack of a long-term future-orientated project of promised happiness, embodied in having her own husband and children, has meant she has fewer worries and is arguably, on a day to day basis, *happier* than her stressed out sister. Once again, her story is unstable, because like most people she doesn't always know exactly how she feels and her moods shift. Though she had laughingly declared that she didn't care about





diabetes (which her mother has, causing a rethink of the family diet) since she has no husband or children so might as well eat herself silly and die, a day later she told me that these days she was happy, saying that “I don’t have any children to worry about, so I’m at peace. I have learned how to be patient.”

Meanwhile, migration’s promise of happiness continues to allure, despite its known capacity for pain. Handing me a letter from the US government, Khaled’s mother and her aging brother asked me to translate. The letter informed them that they had been placed in a queue for a visa number, and may have to wait many years before their application could be processed. Apparently their “American” brother had sent for them both. I was aghast: what on earth was Khaled’s mother thinking? In her 70s, with adult children and grandchildren at home, sons in the United Kingdom, failing health, and most of her time spent praying and reading Quranic texts, why would she want to go to the United States? She didn’t, she said. Her brother nodded sagely. They didn’t want to go, but if the opportunity arose they would take it, for migration was *bhalo* (good), the way forward for the family. After all, despite the heartache, Khaled and his brothers were leading prosperous lives in the United Kingdom and their remittances have helped pay for the broiler farm, fish pond, and new trees that I had been commissioned to film. Again, the family’s accounts of how they are doing changes every time I visit and according to who is speaking: like most families, their fortunes ebb and flow.

### Conclusion: Migration and the promise of happiness

My objective in writing this article has not been to evaluate in a straightforward way whether migration has led to happiness for Khaled and his family. As we have seen its emotional consequences change over time and according to individual subjectivities and perspectives. Rather, it has been to suggest that by posing the question we might interrogate some of its emotional implications. Transnational migration has led to increased prosperity for those concerned, something that, as the very poor are fully aware, is the basis for well-being. Yet it also involves separation from loved ones, placing conflict and ambivalence at the heart of the transnational experience. As we have also seen, the particular political economy of British Bangladeshi transnationalism intertwines with Ahmed’s “happiness scripts” (2010), which plays out around an imagined *bidesh* for those in the *desh*. No matter that the outcomes are often less than happy. The point is that it is hard to imagine future happiness without *bidesh* featuring. As Ahmed suggests, the point of the promise of happiness is to travel, not to arrive. In this sense, it is easier to anticipate happiness than to actually *have* it (Ahmed 2010: 31). This observation is particularly pertinent for migrants who, because their happiness projects involve geographical movement, face inevitable loss and disjuncture: by definition, moving on means leaving people and places behind.

It is here that consideration of the *values* of happiness becomes useful. In the case of British Bangladeshis, the key values of prosperity and togetherness work to produce movement, since migration brings people together across transnational space as well as economic opportunities, and contradict each other, since movement also brings separation. As my brief account of Khaled’s family implies, we



must also distinguish between the promise of happiness and the more pragmatic project of well-being. While places are imagined via fantasies of happiness (*bidesh* is described, literally, as “*kusi*,” happy) they are experienced in terms of actual, measurable well-being, a state that we might usefully distinguish from happiness. As an emotion, happiness is by definition transitory and experienced by individuals rather than the larger group.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while Khaled experiences the jolt of becoming a *ghar jamai*, working long hours in a restaurant, and learning that life in Northern Britain is not how those back in the *desh* imagine, by marrying his cousin and joining his brothers in Burnley he has improved the life chances of his family in Bangladesh who now have another member in the United Kingdom to support them. Those left behind also suffer. In Bangladesh his mother weeps for him but she tells me that it is “good” that he has gone to Britain because life is better there. Here, what we see is how the quest for the long-term well-being and prosperity of the group can involve the temporary unhappiness of individuals. Indeed, living well, whether this involves ensuring physical well-being, providing for one’s family, or building a more secure future, does not preclude unhappiness.

In writing of Khaled and his family and attempting to calibrate my knowledge of them against these questions of relative happiness, I face the impossibility of reaching an end-point or conclusion, for their stories remain unfinished. Not only have their own accounts of motivations and emotions shifted as they look back on events but the future remains unknown, both to the anthropologist and her interlocutors (Dalsgaard and Frederiksen 2013). From this, we should take seriously Michael Jackson’s plea that the purpose of ethnography should be ethical rather than epistemological. Rather than producing answers (migration makes people happy/unhappy) we should be questioning what is taken for granted (Jackson 2013: 118). Basing his moving account of ethics and well-being on the detailed life histories of three migrants, who have overcome great hardship and adversity in order to ensure lives worth living, Jackson argues that the lives and stories of migrants can be understood as analogies for all human experience. As he writes: “rather than implying that people necessarily find fulfillment in being settled in one place or possessing a single core identity, I consider it imperative that we complement this view of a stable self with descriptions of human improvisation, experimentation, opportunism and existential mobility. . . . This capacity for strategic shape shifting, both imaginative and actual, defines our very humanity.” (2013: 202). Indeed, as he continues, we *all* have migrant imaginaries because all of us have to cope with change, whether across space, time, or shifting selfhood and relationships to others.

Migration thus exemplifies the human condition and our universal and ongoing ability to adapt, compromise, and suffer in order to make our lives better. By understanding it as a happiness project rather than a fixed process with measurable outcomes (*does migration make people happy?*) we see how it provides a geographical expression to the dreams and aspirations of Sylhetis, a literal mapping of the future that orders movements over time and space. Yet as with all happiness

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4. Here I depart from Dumont’s account of effervescence, which is experienced collectively via performance of collective values, understanding emotion as primarily individual phenomena.



projects, by focusing on an imagined end point, in this case foreign countries or *bidesh*, migrants and their families are often unprepared for the contradictions, loss, and grief that the journey to arrival at this end point involves. In this sense the contradictions and ambivalences of migration are merely a particularly vivid example of the contradictions and ambivalences that face us all: we believe in the promise of happiness, but the journeys we take to reach the desired end point are inevitably bumpy.

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### La voie du bonheur? Prospérité, souffrance et migration transnationale en Angleterre et à Sylhet

Résumé : Dans cet article, j'analyse la relation entre migration et bonheur à travers les histoires de vie des membres d'une famille engagée, durant plusieurs générations, dans des trajectoires migratoires entre le village de Sylhet et une ville du Nord de l'Angleterre. Plutôt que de rechercher une conclusion définitive quant à savoir si les migrations rendent mes interlocuteurs heureux - comme nous le verrons, les réponses sont extrêmement subjectives et changent constamment - je cherche à comprendre ce que nous pouvons apprendre du bonheur et des migrations en considérant comment des voyages entamés en quête de bien-être génèrent si souvent de la tristesse, un sentiment de perte et de dépaysement profond. J'ai recours en particulier à la perspective de Sara Ahmed, dont les "projets de bonheur" semblent répondre aux contradictions et aux ambivalences au coeur émotionnel de la migration transnationale.

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