

Francesco Della Puppa

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A redeemed biography?

Migration as an intra-family redemption device

by FRANCESCO DELLA PUPPA

1. *Biographies and masculinities*

In the last decade, the use of the biographical approach from a transnational perspective has been successfully adopted in the context of feminist and gender studies, albeit by mainly focusing on female «transnational biographies» (Apitzsch, Siouti 2014), while it has been applied much less often in the gender analysis of male migratory trajectories. Generally, the process of social construction of gender among migrant men and that of negotiating masculinities within the migration experience are research topics rarely delved into by the sociological literature. Within the sociology of migration, attention has been focused for a long time on male migrants (Piore 1979; Sayad 1999), but their gender identity has rarely been problematized. At the same time, the increasingly numerous contributions in the field of men's studies (Carrigan *et al.* 1985; Connell 1995; Piccone Stella 2000) seldom place international migrants as the sole focus of inquiry (Sarti 2010; Scrinzi 2010), while almost never observing them within the interweaving of family relationships. Migrant men, despite the distance from their family contexts, have only rarely been considered in their gender and family contexts while they are always seen as workers and male breadwinners. In this regard, some relevant contributions, which have framed male migration as an experience that contributes to a redefinition of the identity of men and their family dimension and emphasised the moral dimension of their migration, must be mentioned (Broughton 2008; Della Puppa 2014; Donaldson *et al.* 2009). Among them, Rhacel Parreñas (2008), focusing on the intersections between gender, generations and emotional context,

analyses the suffering and embarrassment associated with the loss of confidence and intimacy between fathers and children, the «emotional gap» that could arise between the generations divided by migration. She also analysed the different task of «frontering» (Bryceson, Vuorela 2002) as practised by families with a migrant father, compared to those with a migrant mother. In contrast, Juan J. Bustamante and Carlos Alemàn (2007) point out that, through transnational caring practices similar to those observed among migrant mothers, fathers succeed in preserving their close relationship with their children and overcoming their physical distance. From the perspective of the country of origin, the migration experience of men has been framed as «a rite of passage to adulthood and a step toward manhood» (Monsutti 2007, 167), often emphasising the economic power it gives access to, which allows for masculinity to be negotiated and the shift from «young immature status» to «full adult status» (Osella, Osella 2000, 118-20). However, interest in migrant masculinities has rarely adopted the biographical approach.

Therefore, taking into account the link between gender, age and mobility in Bangladesh and the gender order of Bangladeshi labour migration to Europe, in which the first-migrant member of the family is, mostly, a man (Della Puppa 2014), I have adopted this paradigm to investigate how biographical processes and the social construction of masculinity are shaped by the migration experience (Abbatecola, Bimbi 2013) and, at the same time, how the migration path contributes to its unravelling. Specifically, I will retrace the biography of Hassan, a Bangladeshi man interviewed in Chandpur, Bangladesh, as the younger brother of Mukul, a migrant who resides with his family in Italy. The analysis of his biography makes it possible to observe, on the one hand, the socio-cultural pressures and expectations that, at a given historical moment, have affected his family and, on the other hand, how such norms and expectations have been translated into a discipline that the family has imposed on Hassan and how it has shaped the biographical and migration trajectories of other family members. In particular, I will examine Hassan's return migration in relation to Mukul's decision to emigrate and I will analyse the consequences that such events had on the biographies of the two brothers.

At a theoretical level the return subverts the *traditional* paradigms on migration, while at a biographical level it represents a

delicate moment in which a transformation of the migrant's own role in the society of origin is necessary, implying a review of the domestic economy, models of social mobility and collective aspirations (Black, King 2004; Ndione, Lombard 2004). When abroad, the migrant was subject to a sort of distant inclusion, through his or her participation in the family economy and life; once returned, the migrant becomes the object of exclusion in his own family and homeland (Lecadet 2012), especially if the return is the result of a failure.

Following the path traced by a consolidated sociological tradition both in North America and Europe (Lutz 2016), as well as in Italy (Colombo, Rebughini 2016; Mancini, Bello 2016; Massari 2014), I considered the implications of multiple identities, inequalities, opportunities and normative constraints derived from the intersection between social class, gender, age, cultural identity and civic stratifications, adopting an analytical intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1991) to grasp the connections between structural dimensions, cultural constructions and subjective choices. That is, the relations between economic and social inequality linking Bangladesh to Europe and the downward social mobility embedded into the South-North migration (Anthias 2008), the cultural norms that cross Bangladeshi family and society and the individual agency of family members – specifically Hassan and, above all, Mukul. In doing so, it is necessary to consider the positioning of Hassan and Mukul's family within the upper-middle class, that is the urban and educated class of a society strongly influenced by a caste hierarchy. In fact, the caste hierarchy of Hindu society, strengthened by the British colonial system, has deeply influenced the evolution of Bangladeshi society and that of the whole subcontinent in general (Ahmad 1978; Werbner 1990). However, the Bengali system of social hierarchies would seem to be interested by two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, there is a marked ascriptive tendency and, although different factors influence the status of the individual social actor (job, education, properties, capitals, etc.), birth remains the basis of classification. On the other hand, there is a move to greater fluidity of social status assigned at birth and dynamics of mobility as a result of the phenomena of *modernisation* and transnational migration are taking place (Gardner 1995). It is also necessary to underline that in the Bengali society the patrilineages are transversely cut through the social classes: within the same

lineage, there may be families that have a different economic capital, despite sharing the same symbolic and social capital. This rigidity in Bangladeshi society could lead to the claim that there is a complete overlap between the concept of caste and that of class. However, it is possible to identify, in the binary scheme, structured in the contrast between *borolok* and *chatolok* («big people» and «small people»), the main «traditional» hierarchy based on the status and prestige belonging to the family of origin (Gardner 1995; Priori 2012). This division seems to be particularly felt in both rural areas and urban areas, even if the transformative actions of migration and modernisation processes have undermined the overlap between wealth and prestige and the linearity of this binary classification (Gardner 1995; 2010; Priori 2012). The *class* category, therefore, does not replace that of *status*, but they are closely related to each other. Such a socio-cultural framework is inscribed in a society marked by a strong polarisation that presents, on the one hand, very small groups of individuals connected to the circuits of the global economy, the elite participating in a whirling process of accumulation, and, on the other, a mass of people living in conditions of survival (Muhammad 2007; van Schendel 2009). Between these two poles there is a middle-class in trouble that resists the erosion of its socio-economic position and that defends its access to private education, health and pension system, using the capital at its disposal. In fact, among the resources used, exchanged, converted and increased in the struggle against downward social mobility, there are not only economic, but also cultural, social and symbolic ones – among which, honour has a fundamental importance. Honour is an individual and collective resource at the same time: the behaviour and qualities, as well as successes and failures, of the individual have repercussions on the social credentials of the whole family and each family member is responsible for the behaviour, success and failure of the others. Above all, honour and masculinity are closely linked to each other, since honour can be seen as the symbolic capital of men and, at the same time, masculinity measures men's reproductive capacity, not only in the biological sphere, but also in the social and economic ones. In this dynamic, women constitute the object of male symbolic exchanges and contribute to reproduce male honour (Bourdieu 1972; 1998). It is possible to identify different arenas in which it is possible to reproduce and increase honour

and different forms of capital: among these, for example, the marriage market, the labour market, university paths and, in the dialectic between centres and peripheries, the transnational space and access to *bidesh*¹ through migration mobility (Della Puppa 2014; Gardner 1995; 2010). A successful or a failed migration trajectory of a family member, for example, depends on the coordinated and joint action of the entire household and may increase or compromise the honour and social credentials of all its members, as it is the demonstration of power and resources the family can deploy in that specific arena and, consequently, within the community.

Analysing the biography of Hassan through intersectional lens, I will illustrate how the process of social construction of the masculinity of the individual is inextricably intertwined with the honour and symbolic resources of his family and how migration can constitute an individual and collective strategy to increase these resources. Above all, I will show how the biographical and migratory successes and failures of a family member – in this case, Hassan – can partially determine the biographical and migratory trajectories of other family members – in this case, Mukul, Hassan's elder brother. I will show how globally networked migration trajectories give rise to a plurality of migration pathways that can be followed by different family members and whose complexity can be better understood from a family perspective, combining biographical approach with intersectional lens and transnational perspective.

2. A journey through male migrant biographies

Through a reading of the biographical paths of Bangladeshi men in Italy and their male relatives in Bangladesh, I tried to understand the meaning that these men give to the migration experience and to analyse the intertwining of historical-social transformations within which this experience takes shape, and by which it is partially oriented, as well as their individual and family life trajectories. After having reconstructed the biographies of some migrants in Italy, I then asked some of them if I could be introduced to their family members in Bangladesh to collect

¹ In Bangla, this literally means «foreign land» or «abroad».

life histories of their male relatives. Thus, I have performed a multisite application (Marcus 1995) of the biographical approach, to «sew up» the scission between emigration and immigration (Sayad 1999) and thus convey the global and transnational dimension of migration phenomena and experience (Ambrosini 2014; Boccagni 2009).

The fieldwork provided for prolonged periods of ethnographic practice in Italy (almost two years) and in Bangladesh (over three months) and the collection of 54 biographical interviews in both poles of migration: in Italy, I interviewed 25 migrants who had achieved family reunification; in Bangladesh, I interviewed 19 male family members, as well as 10 men whose families have been affected by different migration experiences. In Italy, the research was mainly carried out among Bangladeshi families residing in the tannery district of the Province of Vicenza. In Bangladesh, the respondents resided in the Capital city, Dhaka, and in its suburbs; in the districts of Madaripur, Faridpur, Shariatpur, Chittagong, Comilla, Sylhet and Chandpur, the city of origin of Mukul and Hassan.

I organised the interview respecting a chronological sequence, which could cut across all the themes of interest and address the narration – even though it could often change in relation to the context, the situation and the respondent. In Italy, the interviews were conducted in English and Italian, according to the interviewees' preference. In Bangladesh, I adopted English with those interviewees who had sufficient linguistic means to easily create narratives in this language, while with others I was helped by a male translator who was not only a linguistic medium, but also made a valuable contribution to the «cultural translation»: a real exercise in mediation, aimed at making the questions I formulated culturally accessible and normatively acceptable (Edwards, Temple 2002; Temple, Young 2004). For the interviews used in this article, I was supported by the translator in the interview with Saiful, while I used English with both Hassan and Mukul – even if the translator was present during the interview with Hassan. Mukul was interviewed at his house in Montecchio Maggiore, a small town in the Province of Vicenza, and he was 48 years old at the time of the interview. Saiful and Hassan were interviewed at Saiful's house in the downtown area of the city of Chandpur and they were aged 51 and 44 at the time of the interview. The names of the respondents are fictitious.

The words of the interviewees have been reported as faithfully as possible, taking into account, *in any case*, a profound work of interpretation and sometimes rewriting (Bourdieu 1993).

3. *A family counter-narrative*

I am a guest of Mukul – whom I interviewed in Italy – at his family home in Chandpur, where his elder brother Saiful lives and who describes the relationships between the members of his family in this way:

We're a very close relationship in our family [...]. We're tight in the very intimate relationship within our family [...]. I think that now we're living as a joint family and, if I live for another 20 years, I will try to maintain this situation.

Mukul and Saiful have two sisters and another brother, the last of five siblings, named Hassan. Their family is one of the best known and esteemed in Chandpur. It belongs to the progressive bourgeoisie of the city. The father was a well-known lawyer who worked between Chandpur and Dhaka thus guaranteeing access to university for his five sons and daughters, as well as leaving them a fine mansion, which today houses the families of his three sons.

Saiful, the first son, who inherited the honour and the duty to follow his father's footsteps by continuing his activity in the family law firm and by becoming a well-known lawyer and a successful politician, is the reason for my stay in Chandpur. He is also the family member with the *legitimate* responsibility to represent the family honour – and, consequently, his own honour as older brother and «guardian of the family» – on front stage in the interview with the researcher, through a positive image of family management, the profitable uses of its capital, and the social and economic successes of its individual members. In fact, it is with him that Mukul, from Italy, put me in touch and with whom he organised the meeting for the interview.

It is during my stay in the house, which for generations has belonged to the family along the paternal line, that I casually meet Hassan, the youngest son, who will ask me if I am also interested in listening to his life. I accept with enthusiasm, even

if Mukul, in Italy, had not foreseen that I would come across a second narrator, while Saiful himself did not mention the possibility of meeting his brother. I understood the reason for this only by listening to Hassans' words:

I have not had good relations with my family. I survived [...] about 19 years [...]. Our family condition is that everybody thinks of himself, except my brother Mukul. I think I am no exception, I am also like that: everybody thinks of himself. My sisters [...] do not know what we do, we do not know what they do. All of us live [...] how they like.

In this way began Hassan, the youngest of the male brothers, the narration about his middle-class family. He pursued and used this opportunity to speak for himself in order to convey his different family history compared to the *legitimate* – and honourable – family story performed by his older brother Saiful.

Hassan continues telling his story about himself, as a favourite son of his parents, a serene boy, surrounded by friends and family:

I was born before the independence of Bangladesh of 1971. I was born in 1965 or 6 [...] but I don't know the exact date of birth because [...] this is the condition of Bangladeshi society [...] many children, many people [...]. I think 90% of people do not know their exact date of birth. And I also do not know my exact date of birth. I was born in '65 or '66 and, when Bangladesh faced war against Pakistan, against East Pakistan, I was a child and what I remember [...]. I do not remember very well, but [...] some things I can remember: after the revolut... I mean... after the independence, I started to go to school and my mother and father loved me. They loved all children of the family and I was not the youngest, but I was their fourth child. Then we had another sister, born after me. My mother loved me very much. We were from [the] middle-class. We lived in a good social environment. I had a lot of brothers, a lot of brothers, I mean friends like brothers, we played together, enjoyed being together, went to school together [...] it was another environment.

To reconstruct his life, Hassan uses as an individual and collective watershed the year of Bangladesh's independence, reached after what Bangladeshi historiography calls the *Liberation War* or *Muktijuddho* – while Pakistani historiography frames it as the Indo-Pakistani war². Independence should have resulted in

² Bangladesh was born as an independent State in 1971, following a bloody war of independence with Pakistan. It was a conflict that can be interpreted as a proxy clash between the different world powers already engaged in the Cold War: the European

realising the expectations of the rural subaltern classes and the educated urban middle-classes by means of a radical transformation of the social and economic fabric. The political and social effervescence of the years immediately following independence also excited the young Hassan, who, however, today bitterly describes his disillusionment and his ideological affiliation:

I was so young, we thought that there would be a revolution in Bangladesh, but [...] we did not. How naive we were! But... I am still a communist [...]. Many things have changed, our view, our ideas, our way of thinking, our connection with people... but I'm still a communist.

Despite expectations of social change that remained largely unfulfilled, the experience of liberation and independence has been adopted by Hassan to draw a line between *before* and *after* in his individual life, as well as in the collective imagination of Bangladesh, which he uses to describe himself and to place his date of birth in a country that did not have an efficient registry office system until «five or six years after independence».

In addition to staging the dialectic between individual history and social history, individual and society, Hassan's words constitute a *family counter-narrative* which attempts to convey a representation aimed at de-constructing and destroying that provided by the older brother, Saiful, the *guardian of the family*, the person authorised to represent family relationships and successes and to preserve the respectability of the household with the *stranger*, that is me, the researcher.

democracies and the US supported Pakistan, given that, due to historical reasons, it could serve as a mediator between the US and China, while the Soviet Union was allied with India in its support for Bangladesh. China remained neutral, at least formally, despite its close alliances with Pakistan (Ali 1971; Jacques 2000; Sisson, Rose 1990). On 26 March of that year, Sheikh Mujibur Rahaman, the leader of the Awami League, the party that led the guerrilla war, proclaimed independence and formed the first government, becoming prime minister. The constituent assembly adopted a constitution that identified socialism, democracy, the economic emancipation of the working class and secularism as its main foundations (Ahmed 2009). The country, in addition to emancipating itself from what was perceived as an internal colonialism perpetrated by West Pakistan, had to renew the organization of production and the system of social and cultural relations, which were feudal (Chanda 1973).

4. *An individual and collective epiphany*

The positive picture that Hassan paints of his youth is also enhanced by academic achievements, to the point of having access to the most prestigious university in the country – where only one out of 80 candidates is admitted – and winning a special scholarship to the Soviet Union:

I was a good student. After [I] completed my school, I took a test at Dhaka University and I got a place there. Then after three or four months I went to Russia, the Soviet Union [...] I was a member of Bangladesh Student's Union [an important student organization of the radical left, which would become the Bangladesh Communist Party] and my big brother also [...]. He was the president of the BSU in Chandpur. I made an application to Dhaka. Two years after and they gave me a scholarship.

This biographical detail allows us to glimpse into the international diplomatic relations in which the young People's Republic was engaged, but also the decisive weight of political organisations in several spheres of social action. In fact, this is part of the strong relationship that Bangladesh had with Soviet Union since its birth³. It also clarifies how in Bangladeshi society, everything depends – yesterday as also today – on alignment with the ruling party or with the hegemony that the various political forces can exert, including access to health services and to public and private labour market, university selection and the allocation of resources⁴. The official history of the country and its international relations intertwine with the family and individual history of Hassan and influence its progress: on the one hand, there are the links between Bangladesh and Soviet Union; on the other, there is Hassan's political adherence to a pro-Soviet student organisation, in line with the political tradition of his family, which provides him with a privileged access to migration.

³ This was a relationship that was maintained for about 20 years, thanks to the persistence of a policy of *non-alignment* in the Bangladeshi parliament, and one which allowed for the institution of numerous scholarships through which thousands of young Bangladeshis went to the Soviet Union or to other Warsaw Pact countries every year to attend university (Priori 2012).

⁴ This is true to the point that, at times, the alternation of rival political forces in power can mean, for those close to the political forces that suddenly find themselves in opposition, sudden expulsion from educational or work paths on which they had previously been placed and, sometimes, even a risk to their physical safety.

The golden youth of Hassan continues throughout the years of his university education, until he comes to an unspeakable fact, *an infamy* that affects the honour of his family of origin even before his own:

When I was in Russia, I had some problems, mainly mental problems, so I came back. And [...] when I came back [to] Bangladesh [...] my friends, my family, my relatives [...] they did not receive me cordially. And I had [a] hard time. Five or six years [...] six, seven years [...] the environment had changed a lot. So, I thought my friends [...] I found that they were further and further [away] from me. And [for] six, seven, eight years, nine years, 10 years, I almost had no friends. I almost had no friends. And now [...] just now, yes, I tell you, I am without my brothers and sisters, I have no relatives. I mean I have no relations with them. None, because nobody accepts me normally, so I have also given up on them. Then I [studied for] a degree and passed second class and got a job in primary school as a teacher. Then, slowly, slowly, I made a new [social] circle. I survived. For about 19 years. I have been detached from many people.

The entrance to Dhaka University and the scholarship at a Russian university led Hassan and his entire family to an improvement in their social credentials, which further increased the esteem and public recognition that they already enjoyed in the city of Chandpur. On the contrary, the failure of his studies and his migration project, the loneliness and the emotional backlash linked to an unrequited sentimental attraction towards a Russian woman – whom Hassan barely mentions, talking about her as «mental problems», but who will later be named by his brother Saiful – pushed him to return to Bangladesh where the attitudes of his family members and friends towards him radically changed. This is the guilt on Hassan's part, which he himself cannot fully name. On the one hand, he had a moment of psychic and emotional fragility. This allows us to see the inner discomfort concerning the weight of one indelible stigma, which is immediately labelled according to the category of infamous diseases. On the other hand, he had an *illegitimate* romantic relationship because it was not previously approved by the family, a relationship born out of an *irrational passion*, instead of a rational marriage, and which was not a homogamic relationship – as an individual of his social status would befit in the Bangladeshi society. It is an epiphany that will alter the intended course of Hassan's life and affect not only its biographical trajectory, but also, as will be shown, that of Mukul (Bonica, Cardano 2008; Denzin 1989). In

other words, it represents a turning point that will impact on the lives of other family members, triggering a chain of events that will irreparably compromise Hassan's life and whose extent can only be weighed retrospectively.

Having failed in the educational system, which at first had conferred honour and prestige on the entire household, and having been touched by the stigma of psychological disease, Hassan made himself and his family ridiculous in the eyes of the community, provoking the reprobation of his family and the estrangement of his friends:

My father was shocked when I came back. He was shocked because I didn't get any certificate or degree. Nobody in Bangladesh received me normally. Some were frustrated with me. People said: «He's not reliable anymore». After many years, now, I work, I have friends, but everything has changed a lot. At that time, I was alone, everybody disappeared, friends avoided me, misbehaved towards me, they thought: «He's finished and we have no reason to keep in touch with him». If you're solvent and progressing, everything is OK, and people think: «He's my friend, he's very good man» But when you fall into trouble, they might change their thinking. I learned one thing: if I had a lot of money, if I was a doctor, they would come to visit me, spend time with me, and they will be nice and interested in maintaining a relationship with me, those who are further and further away from me now. As I fell into trouble, they left me alone.

To understand the reaction of Hassan's friends and family circle, it should be remembered that, in Bangladesh, university education is a prerogative of the wealthiest sections of society. Therefore, acquiring a high level of education – while remaining essential in improving or preserving one's socio-material status – becomes even more difficult. Furthermore, we must not forget the peculiar history that led to the creation of Bangladesh, whose war of liberation took its first steps in Dhaka University with the support of many middle-class students (van Schendel 2009). Thus the capital's university is considered a national monument, while obtaining a degree – especially from that university – still represents one of the highest indicators of social prestige, a sign of distinction and a solid reproducer of social stratification. In Indian subcontinent's societies, strongly influenced by caste hierarchy, including those with a Muslim majority (Ahmad 1978; Werbner 1990), this aim constitutes a sort of *social duty* for middle-class and upper-middle-class families like that of Hassan. Therefore, this allows to understand the expectations that Hassan's

family placed on him, as the youngest son, brother and promising student, and, above all, on his academic experience within a socio-geographical context which was considered prestigious. In fact, the prestige, gifted by the Soviet Union, as a *central* context with respect to the economic and political hierarchies related to the «world system» (Wallerstein 1979), as well as its university system, would have symbolically reverberated around Hassan and his family through his migration (Gardner 2010). Conversely, we understand the disappointment that Hassan's family felt because of his *failure*. Furthermore, it should be emphasised that, after the initial enthusiasm for national independence shown by the most progressive components of the national bourgeoisie, the newly born People's Republic of Bangladesh experienced a long period of political instability to which economic precariousness – connected structural adjustments and intense privatisation campaigns imposed by international financial institutions (Chosudovsky 2003) – can be added. Within such a framework, the only possibility of reactivating social upward mobility for young people from the middle and upper-middle classes was international migration, which Hassan tried and failed.

At the same time, Hassan's narration expresses his frustration with the persistent patronage system that characterises Bangladeshi society. Its socio-political history is characterised by a «patron-client relationship» related to party leaders, public figures or economically influential subjects whom members of Hassan's family can be assimilated with. This relationship acts so profoundly in interpersonal relationships that it can interfere with other spheres, such as friendship, and make the process that sometimes nurtures them hard to see. In the case of Hassan, this has become more evident when his *public and social ascent* was hit by a crisis. In fact, his words reveal the greyness and profound loneliness that accompany his daily life and the social consequences of his failure – that he probably did not imagine so serious.

5. *Discipline and reflectivity*

In the narration of his life, Hassan arrives to face the moment of the creation of *his* own family, which begins with marriage to a woman chosen by his family of origin. This event consti-

tutes the answer to his problems or, better, the adaptation of Hassan to the social and familial pressure concerning the social construction of his masculinity, his entry into adult life and defence of the honour and social respectability of his domestic household. In fact, after the subversion of family and friendship expectations due to his failed university studies and his emotional and personal difficulties, Hassan is forced by the family circle to realign himself with community expectations regarding the marital status considered appropriate to his age:

I didn't decide to get married, rather my family *forced* me to get married. I had been bound to get marr[ied]. Because everybody told me you have to marry. I had no choice; I had to agree. Of course. So, I gave my decision. When they told me: «You have to marry, you *must* get marr[ied]!». Then I give them the word: «Ok, I will». It's a settled marriage. Arranged by my brothers.

The marriage is part of a disciplinary process that the family imposes on Hassan and which will also determine his working, family and parenting trajectory, in order to be recognised as an adult man and to preserve, at least partially, the respectability of other men of his family. At the same time, the marriage that Hassan's brothers arranged for him can be interpreted as a way to cope with his inevitable expulsion from the marriage market linked to his migration failure. In fact, his return migration is not the outcome of success and the achievement of his aims in the *bidesh* (Cavatorta 2017), a so called «innovation return» or a «conservation return» (Cerase 1971). Rather, it is an evident trajectory of failure, which can compromise his (and his relatives') success in other social dimensions, such as marriage (Hirvonen, Lilleør 2014).

Only the working sphere seems to constitute Hassan's modest *shelter* from an uncomfortable daily life:

After the marriage, through my family's contacts, I got this job as teacher. The salary is enough for me. Since I had a child, my need for money increased and I started to work more and more. I am busy with my work. I like to be busy and I like my work now. I enjoy my work. Because when I do my job, people like me. Now, I have my school. People in my school accept me, like me, receive me cordially. So I enjoy my work, my service, my duty.

On the contrary, his relationship with his son (despite the intense affection that Hassan expresses towards him) and – even

more – his relationship with his wife are still sources of disillusionment in a daily life full of continuous reminders to «be happy with what you have»: something he has conformed to in order to avoid further compromising the respectability of his family of origin and in order not to incur other sanctions. This leads him to question marriage and the relationship between couples, both marriages «for love» and the arranged marriages that are still socially legitimate in Bangladeshi society:

Then, after marriage, I had pressure to have a child. When my wife got pregnant and my son was born [...] when I heard the news, I was happy and jubilant. But I don't have time for him. I go out from home in the morning, when he's still sleeping, and I come back home at 10 p.m. [...] Yes, sometime[s], I take him to visit different places. But I cannot give him much time so he likes [...] loves [his] mother more than me. Yes, my son loves his mother more than me. And I am OK with it. Our relation is [...] in this ground. I cannot give him much time and he pass[es] his time with his mother. I don't mind. I'm happy that he's happy with his mother. I just come back home, eat my dinner, watch TV, then I sleep, then I wake up in the morning, I get out from my home, go to work, come back and so on. With my wife [...], I just do my work, ask her what she wants and I try to satisf[y] her. Our relationship is not so much cordial and not so much distant either. It is just [...] *normal*. This is not *in love*. This is just understanding.

Hassan's reflections thus highlight social norms and values that still regulate the marriage market in Bangladesh⁵. Above all, Hassan describes the *mediocrity* that characterizes his matrimonial life, the result of an arranged marriage. In his words, it is also possible to glimpse a «game of marriage compensations» of a hierarchical and ascriptive society in which matrimonial exchanges take place following the already mentioned homogamic logic (Hirschon 1984). The marriage market is an arena where honour and different forms of capitals are reproduced, increased or, at least, preserved; it also improves the social status of the individual and his or her household, according to a hypergamic model in which members of a low status family can improve their status through a profitable marriage exchange. The variables that intervene in the marriage contract include qualities ascribed

⁵ Marriage outside the practice of arranged marriages, despite being more common today than in the past, especially for the educated urban middle-classes (de Silva 2005), is still socially discouraged and depicted as the result of instinctual drives, rather than rationality: the result of passionate love, which, as such, can vanish or re-propose itself for another person.

by birth, possession of material or symbolic resources and the social trajectories of the spouses. Thus, failure to possess certain characteristics or resources may be offset by the possession of other assets. So, if Hassan can claim to belong to a middle-class family, at the same time, he is labelled by a dishonourable stigma. On the contrary, Hassan's wife probably comes from a lower social class, but has agreed to marry a *fool* and a *loser*, by virtue of his class status. Such exchange, however, Hassan seems to allude, does not exempt his wife from a look of blame and pity against him and the creation of a relationship that is not very satisfying, but just enough to respect social norms and community expectations.

His experience of fatherhood and the story that Hassan tells about the relationship *with* his son led him to talk about his relationship *as* son with his father, and to talk once more about the dichotomy between love and rationality that he used to describe his couple relationship:

There are two things: one thing is to accept someone by heart and another thing is to accept someone by logic. Those two things are not the same and I think I love my son by heart, not by logic. While my father loved me by logic, I think.

In this dichotomy, Hassan seems to want to turn away from the paternal model that he accepts as a reference and to claim his disinterested love towards his son, a love that is detached from the social and personal successes that the child may or may not achieve and, consequently, the symbolic family capital that his successes can increase or compromise:

My son's name is Abdullah. His grandfather decided on his name. I mean my father-in-law. I think Abdullah likes me and he loves me. I will always love him. Whatever may be, I will always treat him normally and I don't expect too much from him. Just to be a man.

This, in turn, symbolically linked the grandson to his maternal lineage and not to the paternal one, while the father – Hassan – is kept on the edge and in the shadows as befits a *fool*, a sick person, a deviant.

In Hassan's narrative, a conflict clearly emerges between two languages and two logics. On the one hand, that of the affection and love, to which he would aspire, on the other, that of

social and family conventions, both of the family of origin and the family of his wife. In any case, between these two family systems Hassan holds a subaltern position. He accepts the choices that his family made for him, accepts that he has a mediocre relationship with his wife and even with his son, accepts his position of subordination even in his intimate life. Hassan's quiet narrative – that stun even the translator, silent next to me – speaks of his personal tragedy and his passive acceptance of an already determined future and continually refers to the stigma through which he is constantly defined. He lives in makeshift-life constructed for him by others and *adapts* himself to this, adhering to his relatives' expectations, not to further compromise the image, reputation and honour of his family. At the same time, however, he claims – in spite of what his brothers planned for my visit – that they were not his choices, even if he considers them acceptable.

6. *A redeemed biography?*

It is within this biographical framework that Mukul's migration experience is placed and which appears as an – unconscious and embedded – attempt to redraw the image of the family, restore its respectability and recover the honour compromised by the failure of his younger brother.

While Saiful, as the firstborn, found his place in the family genealogy, ensuring the continuity of his father's business and managing the family properties, it is Mukul's responsibility, the second son, to redeem Hassan's failure and the family honour in the public perception through a further investment in migration, bearing in mind the gender variations that characterise migration from Bangladesh to Europe, in which the family member that starts the migration chain is, in most cases, a man. The opening of new migration horizons – such as Italy and Southern Europe – and the identification of a strategy of upward mobility among the middle and upper-classes in the migration experience in Europe⁶ contributed to the creation of migration networks

⁶ In the 1990s, Southern European countries, such as Italy, started to emerge as destination sites from Bangladesh. This phenomenon is related to the closure of the borders of Central and Northern European countries (Priori 2012), the complete shift

interweaved by the educated masses of young Bangladeshis. This migration opportunity was taken up by Mukul, in an intertwining of this transnational framework and the need to repair the partial damage done to his family's social prestige.

Today, Mukul works as a labourer in Italy; despite the inadequacy of his position in the Italian labour market, if compared to the social status of his family of origin, this job allows him to accumulate substantial economic capital, to reactivate upward social mobility for himself and for his family and, consequently, to recover the family's honour, symbolic capital and social credentials for the benefit of the whole family. In fact, it is through the whole family that, positively or negatively, the conduct of individual members and the possibilities and expectations of each one reverberate. Moreover, by emigrating to Europe, Mukul restores not only his desirability in the marriage market but also the one of the other members of the family, previously compromised. His permanence in Italy is, therefore, meant to compensate for Hassan's failure in the eyes of the Chandpur community. At the same time, it is also a way to repair, through remittances, the system of torn family relationships, trying to meet the material needs of each individual member and to bring together all the male members under the roof of the paternal house, which has been expanded with resources sent from Italy. Even Hassan, in fact, reserves special words of praise for Mukul – the only one who «would not think only of himself» and who sacrificed himself for the collective good – within a narrative entirely aimed at discrediting the idealised family relationship provided to me by the oldest brother, Saiful:

He decided to leave the country when I came back from Russia. He's the only one who take[s] care of the family. He has a feeling for his father, his brothers and his sisters. For everybody. He's the only one in the family. Today was our father[']s first death anniversary and he phoned me. While my two sisters did not phone us or something [...] nothing. Mukul sends money, he accepts all of us, all of our condition, he asks, he cares for us, not for me, also for father, brothers, sisters, relatives [...] and I do not see any other who take[s] so much care.

of Italy from a country of emigration to a country of immigration (Pugliese 2002) and the transformation of its labour market, which required a flexible and low-cost labour force, supported by «instrumentally lax» migration policies (Della Puppa 2014).

Mukul does not expressly address the reasons for his emigration or, rather, he generically describes his willingness to find a job – even if, as he mentions, he had not finished his university studies yet – with which he could support his family:

When I was studying in Dhaka, I was thinking to get a job, but you know in Dhaka, in Bangladesh, to find the good job is very difficult. I was thinking to get a job for me and for my family. [...] There was an agency, they gave an advertisement that in Saudi Arabia they want to recruit some people for a supermarket. [...] So they call me for an interview, they asked if anyone was interested to go, so... I went there. I talked them, I got the interview, they need... they need – I think – forty persons, and then they selected me. [...] It wasn't a good salary, but better than Bangladesh at least, so I decided to go there.

At most, Saiful, the eldest brother – as well as Hassan himself – links or, at least, temporally relates the failure migration and return of Hassan with the decision of Mukul to stop his studies and leave the country:

My younger brother Mukul was in Jaganat University, but he did not complete his master's because he decided to go to Jeddah. Then from Saudi Arabia to Italy. It was his personal choice. He decided to leave the country when Hassan came back from Russia, Armenia. Hassan was in the University of Medical Science, but he could not complete his studies so he came back home.

Apparently, therefore, Mukul does not represent his decision as a migration aimed at remedying the impact that the failure of the younger brother has had on the image and the respectability of the family. However, this omission should be considered obvious and, in some ways, it reinforces the interpretation of his migration as a *reparative* migration. On the one hand, in fact, the intentional meaning of his action is embedded in the cultural and class habitus that governs his life and, therefore, his socio-cultural dispositions oriented his migratory choice even if he would not consciously have adopted the aim (Bourdieu 1994). On the other hand, Mukul is silent about the failure of his brother. In fact, it is no coincidence that Mukul, from Italy, put me in touch and organised my interview with Saiful and not with Hassan – who took the initiative to talk to me independently and unexpectedly. This, both to prevent me from collecting a representation of his family that effectively damaged its honour and respectability, and because Hassan is considered

by his brothers as an unreliable person, a *fool* and a *loser* who does not deserve any consideration.

7. *A multi-level biography, an imaginary dialogue, a desperate attempt at self-rehabilitation. Some concluding remarks*

Through the analysis of Hassan's biography and his return migration to Bangladesh, this paper shows the interconnections and interdependencies existing between the process of social construction of individual masculinity and the honour of his family, through the adoption of the biographical approach in the study of transnational family and gender in migration. In particular, this paper has addressed the increase (or preservation) of the honour of the family and its symbolic resources as driver of international migration. If migration constitutes an individual and collective strategy to increase symbolic resources and social credentials of the family and its members, its failure similarly leads to humiliation for the whole household. If Hassan's migration to Russia increased his family's prestige in Bangladesh, his unexpected return compromised the positive image of the family on the public stage. To remedy this shame, Mukul – Hassan's older brother – undertook a further migration to Italy.

The story of Hassan's life can be read on two levels: on the first level, there is his individual and family experience; on a deeper level, there is the collective history which embraces the historical and social dynamics he and his family are immersed in. At individual level, his narrative reveals the acceptance of the consequences of his action and his failure, which he also considers a guilt that should be expiated, and resignation to a life of disillusionment. It is possible to see the profile of a man disappointed by political struggle, by his circle of friends, by his feelings of love, by his marriage and by his parental life. At the same time, through Hassan's biography, it is possible to see a picture of the historical and social transformations that have affected Bangladesh in the aftermath of independence and the international relationships that the country has established with other parts of the world. We can also glimpse the clientelistic and political patronage dynamics that characterise Bangladeshi society, the importance of high cultural capital to middle-class families and the indispensable mark of social distinction – and

reproduction – conferred by a university degree. The size of this capital determines the position occupied in the marriage market, in the exchange of symbolic assets and in the social credentials' system, both for the entire family structure and for each of its members.

Hassan disregarded the expectations of his family, casting a shadow of humiliation over the entire household. For the family and the community, he became a *loser* and a *fool* and he also internalises these labels, attributing its failure to «mental problems» and accepting the social consequences within his family and the community. A *loser* because he has failed in achieving his goal to be a successful adult middle-class man through migration to Russia and access to a prestigious foreign university. A *fool* because he is removed from the public stage and his voice has no citizenship, to the point that he is not even considered a reliable respondent for my research.

The impact of this *infamy* was crucial in determining a trajectory of social and symbolic humiliation. In fact, his return migration must be seen in terms of failure which does not *just* transform his status from a member of the community to a «foreigner in his own homeland» (Sayad 1999), but from a respected and valued subject to a marginalised, unreliable and subaltern object (Lecadet 2012).

His migration appears to be an attempt to restore family respectability, to recover the image compromised by the failure of his younger brother and to defend the honour of family members. Mukul's silence on the reasons for his migration does not contradict this interpretation, rather it reinforces it. Both because this choice is embodied in his internalised disposition – perhaps not entirely conscious – and because naming it would mean reawakening the collective humiliation Hassan is responsible for.

The biography and the success of Mukul's migration, therefore, are closely linked to the biographical ascent and subsequent migration and university failure of the younger brother. At the same time, Hassan's biographical trajectory seems thus redeemed by the migration *sacrifice* of Mukul who worked as an intra-family redemption device. Therefore, the interweaving of migration and biographic trajectories of Hassan and Mukul point out not only that migration should be considered a *polyphasic* shift between multiple destinations (Della Puppa, King 2018), but also that

this polyphasic aspect can be observed within the same family and can be implemented by different subjects.

To fully understand the social condemnation that has struck Hassan, and comprehend Mukul's migration choice, both their gender and the social status of their family must be considered. In fact, talking about gender is necessary in order to understand the social expectations placed on adult men and the family roles attributed to them within Bangladeshi society. Being an adult man involves the assumption of a double load of responsibility because in order to defend his honour, a man must safeguard his reputation and that of his family members which are inextricably connected to each other. It is in the overlap between individual and family biographical trajectories, and in the light of the proximity between the categories of class and status, that it is possible to grasp how Hassan's failure to meet class expectations, with regard to his educational path and his ultimate line of work, calls into question the honour and prestige of all his family members. At the same time, the transformative action of the aforementioned migration path makes it possible to understand Mukul's decision to emigrate, the symbolic and material redemption that it has involved in relation to Hassan's failure.

To defend one's male honour and to represent oneself as a realised man, thus implies, on the one hand, the burden of being able to preserve or increase the honour of one's family, its social position and the standard of living of its members – ensuring, for example, a university education, access to private healthcare or a favourable marriage through which upward social mobility can be ensured – in a socio-economic context that is crossed by daily forms of clientelism and extremely polarised and devoid of any form of public welfare. On the other hand, there is the omnipresent obligation to control and discipline lives and trajectories, as well as the conduct and behaviour, of every family member. Therefore, individual success and honour merge and intersect with family success and honour – influencing and reverberating with each other – and the tactics aimed at increasing the social and symbolic nature of the family. It results in trace trajectories that go through the construction of masculinity for family members, while intersecting gender and class categories. By assuming such a perspective and intersecting categories of gender and class, it is possible to observe the interweaving of the individual biographical trajectories of Hassan and Mukul, as

well as the influence they have on the collective biographical trajectory of their family, and to shed light on the links existing among social dynamics, historical processes and biographical experiences in the framework of increasing transnationalisation of people's opportunities and strategies.

Moreover, with respect to the intensification of these dynamics and the use of the biographical approach at transnational level, further reflections emerged. The interview turned out to be a battlefield where the brothers' narratives and counter-narratives were in conflict. This could be grasped thanks to the adoption of a multisited methodology for the interviews and the transnational use of the biographical approach. For Hassan, I did not represent the *stranger* in front of whom he preserves the respectability of the household as I did for Mukul and Saiful, but rather the Simmelian archetype of the *stranger* (Simmel 1908) to whom the most surprising and sincere confessions are often made. Hassan has instrumentally used the researcher to give life to narratives that had no citizenship in any other public or private space. Therefore, the interview represented the only moment in which such stories could be told and heard, the only space in which these narratives can hope to find recognition. But it was also a neutral space, between public and private dimensions, where the various voices of Mukul, Saiful and Hassan, who are usually unable to talk to each other – at least, on this biographical junction – can finally confront and clash in an imaginary dialogue. The unexpected ways in which Hassan *conquered* this space and gave life to his story – a continuous and determined narrative flow without waiting for any of my questions – reveal, however, that the interview also constituted his cry of protest and his desperate attempt to rehabilitate himself, the only moment in which he found his dignity. In fact, he passively accepted the label of being the person who, because of «mental problems», has compromised his family honour and had to resign himself to a life chosen by his brothers. However, he also wants to reiterate that these were *not his* choices, *his* decisions, partially diverging from the image of being an inept. Despite this, his protest will remain confined to the researcher's recorder and the dialogue with his brothers will not take place.

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A redeemed biography? Migration as an intra-family redemption device

This contribution is the result of a wider research aimed at deepening the understanding of the social construction of masculinity during the migration experience from Bangladesh to Italy, analysing how the social construction of masculinity is shaped by this experience and, at the same time, how the migration path contributes to its unravelling. Specifically, the article is based on the life story of Hassan, a Bangladeshi man interviewed in Chandpur, Bangladesh, and the younger brother of Mukul, a migrant resident in Italy. Hassan's biography is intertwined with the profound social transformations that have emerged in

Bangladesh and Italy since the 1970s and intersected by the different migratory trajectories experienced by his family.

The analysis of Hassan's biography allows us to observe, on the one hand, the pressures and expectations of the socio-cultural context, which, in a given historical moment, have impacted his family, especially its male members, as a consequence of their class position. On the other hand, it is possible to observe the way in which such norms and expectations have been translated into a discipline that Hassan's family has imposed on him and, at the same time, shaped the biographical and migratory trajectories of other male family members.

Keywords: biographical trajectories, return migration, social expectations, family honour, masculinity.

Francesco Della Puppa, Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage, Ca' Foscari University in Venice, Palazzo Malcanton Marcorà, Dorsoduro 3246, 30123 Venice, Italy. E-mail: francesco.dellapuppa@unive.it.

