

# Virtual Connectivity through Creativity: Diasporic Bangladeshi Women Sculpting Cultural Identity in পেন্সিল (*Pencil*)

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## Abstract

This article involves a popular Facebook group named *Pencil* that features creative productions from Bangladeshi people from around the world. While its basic focus is on writing, it also creates room for audio-visual productions such as songs, poetry recitation, dance, and photography. Among the contributors, a modest number is from diasporic Bangladeshi women who represent Bangladeshi culture through their artistic endeavors. The purpose of this research is to study how diasporic Bangladeshi women writers make use of the virtual platform of *Pencil* to express their kinship to Bangladeshi culture, as well as to carve an identity to endorse it. The prevalent discussion here is theoretical with a limited close reading of texts. While discussing the process of identity formation, this research refers to Stuart Hall's concept of "cultural identity" to create its theoretical background. Another predominant idea of the research is the "cyberspace" provided by the Internet to diasporic subjects. The final concept is "digital diaspora" which is integral to the study of cyberspace and diaspora. Considering the debate on the ambiguous role of cyberspaces in women's emancipation, this article argues in favor of cyberspaces by perceiving that the virtual platform promotes women's resourcefulness.

**Keywords:** women's identity, digital diaspora, cyberspaces, creativity

Diasporic identity is an elusive term in that its conceptual clarity diminishes with the plethora of appropriations cumulated around the concept. This article's concern is to observe how information technology (IT) facilitates diaspora identity construction through the practice of writing about one's native culture and the process of acculturation while residing in a foreign culture.

Diasporic identity formation today is vastly dependent on and facilitated by IT. The cyberspaces created by the Internet can give the dispersed diasporic subjects "a sense of shared understanding – no one else could possibly provide" (Brinkerhoff 47). This article attempts to shed light on the intricate relationship between social media cyberspace and diasporic life. Another focus of this work is to analyze the gendering of cultural practices as an indicator of preserving native traditions in a host country. This complicated proposition aligns with the idea of a hybrid identity as it requires an amalgamation of local and global culture as opposed to cultural polarization. Brinkerhoff posits that virtual communities offer diasporic subjects to deviate from a predictable pattern by selecting identity components from both the home and host cultures. Such an identity based on scattered components can be best understood by resorting to Stuart Hall's concept of "cultural identity."



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The synthesized identity is stated by Stuart Hall as a hybrid state since it is embedded in differences. According to Hall, cultural identity can be explained in at least two ways. Whereas the first kind of cultural identity reflects the shared historical experiences and cultural codes of a given people, the second, and more complicated cultural identity is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being” (Hall 236). This second kind of cultural identity undergoes a constant transformation and therefore eschews the fixity of essence and becomes unstable in nature. Cultural identity can be either complicit with or departing from historical orientation, or it can even be both at the same time. That is why Hall defines cultural identity as “[n]ot an essence but a positioning” (237).

As Hall theorizes that diasporic cultural identity is always in a fluid state prone to mutations, it is obvious that at the present time the formation of a diasporic cultural identity should be significantly influenced by the dialogical spaces provided by the Internet. Thus, concepts such as “digital diasporas” and “web-diasporas” (Brinkerhoff; Ponzanesi), cyberfeminism, and cyberspace are relevant to this work as they have a role to play in diasporic cultural identity formation.

The use of virtual platforms for sharing cultural substances is not new for different diasporic groups across the globe. For example, Liza Tsaliki talks about the virtual cultural community formed by the Greek diaspora which she calls “Greekness” constructed on the Internet (162). Based on a recent survey finding, it is assumed that 98.5% of Bangladeshi immigrants in Canada exchange views on cultural, social, and professional issues on social media (Shuva 307). It is apparent from these studies that the Internet’s support in establishing and continuing a rapport with the home culture from the host country has opened up a sea of possibilities for creative people by facilitating virtual community building. The focus of this research is particularly on women for some reasons. First, I argue that diasporic women are more active in reliving native culture. Next, women find it convenient to employ cyberspace in creating agency by practicing native culture. In this sense, cyberspace offers a convenient platform for women to explore their aesthetic subjectivities.

An online platform endorses a number of authors, from inside and outside Bangladesh, to showcase their writing both virtually and in printed forms. This Facebook group, *Pencil*, also has its own publishing house that brings out a good number of books every year. Many diasporic Bangladeshi women writers regularly contribute to this group and some of them have also been published through it. These writings are widely read and reviewed by people both on and offline. This study’s focal point is to create a theoretical framework using the concept of gendered digital diaspora. Therefore, theoretical discussion is pivotal here. A limited study of two texts by two diasporic Bangladeshi women writers from this platform is included to perceive how the writers depict their own struggles in creating cultural identities through the fictional characters’ struggles in the host land.

*Pencil* promotes creative activities like writing, painting, recitation, dance, singing, and photography, mostly by Bangladeshi people scattered across the globe. Through close observation, it becomes obvious that several Bangladeshi diasporic women play an active

role in these creative accomplishments which are acclaimed by a considerable number of people. Many of these contributors, especially writers, publish printed versions of their books from Bangladesh and travel here to celebrate the launching event. It is also worth mentioning that reunions of *Pencil* take place in countries like the USA, UK, and Australia where diasporic “pencilors” (a term invented by the group to identify the contributors) gather with their families to showcase Bangladeshi culture to their children and local people of those countries. Many diasporic female writers of this group write about the fictional and nonfictional lives of Bangladeshis living in the USA, UK, and Canada. Some of them post their renditions of Nazrul and Rabindra songs to show the nurturing of home culture. Most of the celebrated food photography posted here by diasporic women features Bangladeshi foods like “khichuri-ilish,” “milk tea,” “vorta-bhaat,” and so on.

The inclusion of the virtual platform *Pencil* in academic research such as this article is pertinent in the sense that here I focus on the fictional writing of two diasporic Bangladeshi female writers. Apart from them, there are several other writers from the same category who regularly contribute to this platform upholding the navigation of fictional diasporic characters between home and host cultures. Since they reflect their own experiences in the writings and share them on a digital platform, it is not inappropriate to study that platform from a literary perspective.

Selecting female writers’ works to observe how they amalgamate local and foreign cultures is grounded in the ensuing discussion. The emphasis of this article is on female writers because in the matter of identity formation of immigrants, gender is a defining factor and it is more so when South Asian women migrants are in question. Whether subject to compulsory or voluntary migration, diasporic people often tend to create a replicated homeland to relive national culture. In this context, national culture assumes a fixed, hence unflinching form, that symbolizes the recuperation of the homeland in the diaspora. This code of national culture enables immigrants to forge identities distinct from the dominant host culture. In the construction of a replicated home culture, the role of women has been considerably explored in diaspora studies. It has been argued that in an attempt to create a moral superiority over the “impinging Western influence,” diasporic communities view the family, and especially women, as the preserver of “cultural sanctity” (Bhatia 515).

In her insightful essay “The Habit of Ex-nomination: Nation, Woman, and the Indian Bourgeoisie,” Anannya Bhattacharjee argues that Indian immigrants create the idea of a nation that is ahistorical and not a geographically bound unit. She opines that this idea of a nation, in absence of any historical context, is constituted of “a timeless essence of Indian unity in diversity” and “the question of women [is] inextricably linked to nationness” (20-28). As women are considered vessels for storing the traditional values necessary for retaining the idealistic image of the nation in the diaspora, a mandatory division is created in the shared space of immigrant men and women as a domestic and public space. Bhattacharjee notes that whereas men occupy the public space of economic/political advancement, the figure of the woman stands in the domestic space signifying culture and tradition, even if she works outside the home. This is because the “Indian woman

is expected to be responsible for maintaining the Indian home in diaspora by remaining true to her Indian womanhood” (Bhattacharjee 32). From Bhatia and Bhattacharjee’s cues regarding women’s supposed role as the preserver of home culture, this article wants to establish that a similar performance of women as cultural envoys is apparent in diasporic Bangladeshi female writers’ works.

Preserving native culture in the present time largely depends on the virtual spaces provided by the Internet. Cultural identity has assumed a new facet in the age of digital diaspora. Digital diaspora, in Sandra Ponzanesi’s words, indicates that “there is a continuity between the online and offline worlds” (982). It involves reviewing online interactions, web hyperlinks, and digital traces online. However, Ponzanesi perceives that digital diaspora is an elusive term as it is flexible but also runs the risk of overgeneralized use. She thinks it is best to use this term relationally based on individuals or small groups of people experiencing different sets of materials, symbolic and emotional practices, that are all reflective of intersecting power relations. However, Ponzanesi believes in the transformative power of the digital diaspora which can propel migrants to reach new heights of endeavors. The following words make her point clear:

Yet there is agreement on the profound ways in which digital connectivity has transformed privileged terms of spatiality, belonging and self-identification. Digital diasporas provide new possible cartographies to map the self in relation to increasingly complex patterns of globalization and localization, avoiding closures and the negative effects of identity politics. (Ponzanesi 990)

Digital diaspora has given the migrants an opportunity to sculpt the self in accordance with intricate forms of globalization and localization, opening up enormous possibilities for identity formation. Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff explores this perception of the digital diaspora in her book *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement* as an advantageous agency as information technology helps form virtual communities that provide solidarity and material benefits. Cyberspaces also facilitate the negotiation of hybrid identity leading to the mobilization of the diasporic subject. Brinkerhoff accentuates the role of the Internet in developing virtual communities in the following words:

The Internet is a mobilizing tool for the various types of organizations it supports. It facilitates the formation of shared identity necessary for collective action; it is an organizational/networking resource for assembling and communicating among individuals and groups, providing information and referrals to other actors; and it facilitates issue framing and confidence building. Results of mobilization agendas can be posted and disseminated to inspire continued commitment and subsequent mobilization. (Brinkerhoff 47)

Diasporas utilize this mobilizing power of the Internet for material benefits, such as information sharing and referral. Even though scattered around the globe, diasporic people can now create a sense of solidarity “around a shared cultural heritage and diaspora experience” (Brinkerhoff 203). In the process of forming a shared, hybrid identity,

cyberspaces generated by digital diasporas play a pivotal role in the construction of a cultural identity reminiscent of the home culture in the host country. Following the function of digital diaspora defined by Ponzanesi and Brinkerhoff, this research argues that *Pencil* also provides a shared space for the Bangladeshi digital diaspora by creating an appropriate cyberspace. For a better understanding of the ripple effect of practicing home culture from the host country, the next section delineates the idea of cyberspace.

The term “cyberspace” was coined by William Gibson in his cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* where he gave a complicated overview of it. For Gibson, cyberspace is complex and a paradigm of data. At present, it envisages the digitalized platforms that are operated through the Internet. These platforms help the users form an imaginary identity albeit not totally virtual in many instances. For example, in artistic platforms like *Pencil*, the content creators frequently navigate in and out of virtual reality, producing an amalgamated presence thereby. Although it is presumed that traditional power structures are retained and even reinforced in cyberspace, women find it more appropriate to showcase their talent through it because of the veneer created by its distance from the real world. Robert A. Saunders analyzes the internal association between cyberspace and diaspora by observing that the “technological unification” has enabled diasporic Chinese people to develop “transnational identities and mobility across the Pacific Rim” (Saunders 72). Saunders also observes that acting as “economic and social elites” they have created “cultural continuums” that bind Australia, the USA, and many far Eastern Asian countries (72). Although he is not so enthusiastic about cyberspace creating novel methods of maintaining the nation virtually, he believes that it offers diasporic people “to have access to another realm of existence for a brief period of time” (Saunders 88). The present article also agrees with the idea that the virtual platform is not influential enough to create an impact at the national level; however, it definitely caters to the individual diasporic person’s endeavor to carve a cultural identity in their homeland in spite of living in another country. It is evident from the present discussion that some Bangladeshi women’s writing in *Pencil* can be considered to be an effort to form an identity statement. However, no significant study has so far been conducted about this process that connects gender, cyberspace, and digital diaspora in the context of Bangladesh. Therefore, through theoretical and textual discussion this article attempts to show that diasporic Bangladeshi women can create identity statements utilizing cyberspace.

To link the theoretical framework with the textual cases in point, this section briefly studies one short story by Ishrat Maherin Joya, a Bangladeshi writer settled in the USA, and a novel by Tabassum Naz, another Bangladeshi writer residing in Canada. Both the texts first appeared virtually on *Pencil* before getting printed by the same publishing house. In the short story by Joya, “Dhulomakha Shwapno,” the Bangladeshi protagonist Rumana is shown as a struggling graduate engineering student at the University of Texas at Arlington. Unlike her classmates, she has to take care of her family along with studying. At home, she cooks and babysits. During group study sessions, she attends to numerous phone calls from family members and friends, seeking her suggestions on different household matters. There are also texts from her husband to come home early to release him from babysitting. She

also has to attend Bangladeshi family gatherings every week with home-cooked deshi food. Rumana struggles with mental trauma, frustration, and helplessness as she juggles her roles as a traditional Bangladeshi housewife and an American student. However, she is resilient enough to continue her study with help from her friends and digitalized communication tools like email and e-libraries.

The author of this story, Joya, was also a graduate student of Electrical Engineering like Rumana at the University of Texas at Arlington. There are some autobiographical elements in the story that reintroduces the writer as a diasporic subject who has been negotiating her identity using different cultural components including the Internet. Her presence in *Pencil* is also a part of the process of refashioning her diasporic identity.

An almost similar observation can be made about the other writer, Tabassum Naz, a doctor by profession who did further study in Canada and adapted to the new surroundings, having traveled a rough path. She uses the virtual space of *Pencil* to write about both Bangladeshi and Canadian cultures that make her fictional characters navigate assimilated identities. The novel *Rudaba* by Naz is about the eponymous Bangladeshi girl who journeys to Toronto after marrying a diasporic Bangladeshi man, Jamee. Jamee's sister, Dolon, is a diasporic woman who preserves her home culture in Canada despite being assimilated into Canadian mainstream society in many ways. For example, she is a successful working woman who is capable of doing things on her own. She also buys western clothes and cooks Canadian food. However, she also throws elaborate all-Bangladeshi parties and offers Rudaba her traditional saris and ornaments on certain occasions. In the novel, both Dolon and Rudaba strike a balance between the cultures of the home and host countries by utilizing identity markers like language, food, and attire. On a deeper level, Dolon relentlessly negotiates between the Bangladeshi community and her outside life as a working woman through a series of adjustments. Rudaba also starts learning to integrate her life as a Bangladeshi wife and a Canadian student. She connects with her family and cooks Bangladeshi cuisine with help from several digital platforms.

In the mentioned texts, the writers portray how contemporary diasporic Bangladeshi women strive to create a hybrid identity that is intertwined with their off and online activities. The reflection of the writers' own diasporic struggle is discernible in these fictional characters' gradual transformation. In both texts, the writers' focus on the empowering impetus of cyberspace on the protagonists implicates an analogy between them and their fictional characters.

Following the fictional representations in the texts under discussion, this article argues in favor of the stimulant function of cyberspace in diasporic women's creativity. That is why it calibrates how and in what ways cyberspaces help women's emancipation. Apart from voluntary activities on a digitized social platform, many Bangladeshi diasporic women are engaged in creating commercial content utilizing participatory media like *You Tube*. Although the present article revolves around the voluntary activities of women in the Facebook group *Pencil* to make a cultural statement, these activities indirectly promote their economic accomplishments too. For example, a few diasporic women writers gained

remarkable popularity using this platform before publishing printed versions of their works. They also used *Pencil* to promote their books. Consequently, the sale of the books rose substantially, bringing in a good amount of royalty for the authors. In the same way, photographs posted in the group helped the photographers reach a wider audience as well as achieve awards and accolades. Kylie Jarrett thinks that women’s “cognitive and affective efforts in building and sustaining interpersonal relationships online, in communicating and coordinating activity with others, in producing and sharing content, is at the heart of the collective intelligence of digital media’s commercial properties” (9). From this observation, it can be deduced that in addition to forming cultural identity, social media activities can also enhance the financial accomplishments of women.

Taking a cue from the current discussion the point can be further explored with the study of Maura McAdam, Caren Crowley, and Richard T. Harrison in their essay “Digital Girl: Cyberfeminism and the Emancipatory Potential of Digital Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies.” This essay interprets how digital entrepreneurship can play the role of a great leveler in terms of equalizing the entrepreneurial playing field for women. The authors show in their research how Saudi Arabian women utilize the online platform “to transform their embodied selves and lived realities rather than to escape gender embodiment as offered by the online environment” (McAdam 349). Since this article mainly studies cyberfeminism in the context of cyberspace, digital diaspora, and some Bangladeshi diasporic women’s trajectory in preserving their cultural identity using a digital platform, it gets involved in the mandatory debate on the role of cyberspaces in women’s emancipation.

Some debates about the gender codes in cyberspace often initiate contradictory discourses. For example, critics such as Anita L. Allen, Debbie Ging, Eugenia Siapera, Valerie Dickel, and Giulia Evolvi are skeptical about the impartiality of cyberspace regarding gender codes and traditional societal power structures. Ging and Siapera believe that misogyny and anti-feminism intensify in online environments and can also spill over to other domains of life. Dickel and Evolvi find that offline misogynist narratives may also proliferate on the Internet. However, some critics consider cyberspaces as relatively unbiased towards gender. Studies also suggest that female-only groups offer a safer domain for women to reveal their talents. Howard Rheingold propagates the idea of the Internet as being “a space that promotes the spirit of cooperation and the creation of a truly democratic discourse and practice” (qtd. in Bonder 32). Rheingold perceives that the virtual community based on the Internet can offer participatory democracy for marginalized groups of people including women. However, Anita L. Allen thinks both men’s and women’s privacy is vulnerable in cyberspace even though women suffer more from the issue. The counter-argument to this view can be found in Kuah-Pearce who holds that cyberspace permits women users to engage themselves in different entertainment and economic ventures: “The information galaxy, the cyberspace and the Internet ... are no longer viewed as a masculine space and tool as women have not only embraced but also used the cyberspace to negotiate and reframe themselves within existing social structure” (11). As cyberspaces provide virtual platforms for women to display their talents, it becomes easier for them to continue their work, avoiding bullying and assaults. Most digital platforms have administrators to deal

with cyberbullying and misconduct. Consequently, women feel safer expressing themselves freely in these cyberspaces.

Although this article does not anticipate Bangladeshi diasporic women becoming “cyborg(s),” rather than “goddess(es)” (Haraway 181), it definitely endorses the concept that cyberspaces promote women to sculpt individual cultural identities in the host country. Blending the theoretical and limited textual discussion, this research argues that irrespective of gender bias in virtual spaces, Bangladeshi diasporic women appropriate digitalized platforms in the reshaping process of their cultural identity. It is evident that both fictional characters and writers benefit from cyberspaces in expanding their horizons to accommodate native and host cultures. The transterritorial networking made possible by the digital diaspora initiates immense possibilities for creative Bangladeshi diasporic women in traversing the terrain of identity reinscription.

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