

HOME BETWEEN *BIDESH* AND *SHODESH*: DOMESTICATION OF LIVING SPACES, IDENTITIES AND GENDER EXPERIENCES IN THE BANGLADESHI DIASPORA

Francesco DELLA PUPPA¹

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ABSTRACT

Home between *Bidesh* and *Shodesh*: Domestication of Living Spaces, Identity and Gender Experiences in the Bangladeshi Diaspora

This article deals with the housing strategies and changing living styles of the Bangladeshi population in a small town in north-eastern Italy. It analyses the re-use and “domestication” of everyday public spaces, as a way of exploring how *bidesh* (foreign-land) space is transformed into a *shodesh*, home-like space. A parallel process of re-functionalization occurs in the private sphere. Different forms of cohabitation are put in place to deal with immigrants’ family-based needs, against deteriorating economic conditions.

The process is not without contradictions. For instance, family reunification allows men to recover an important component of their emotional universe, possibly healing the loneliness of migration. Reunited women, though, may experience their new home as an ambivalent place of solitude. Along these lines, the paper also highlights the gap between men’s and women’s views of “home” and “home-land”, in order to make sense of their evolving ways of “feeling at home”.

KEYWORDS: Bangladeshi diaspora, north-eastern Italy, gender, home-making, everyday life

IZVLEČEK

Dom med *bidesh* in *shodesh*: domestifikacija življenjskih prostorov, identiteta in spolne izkušnje v bangladeški diaspori

Članek se ukvarja s stanovanjskimi strategijami in spreminjanji življenjskih stilov bangladeškega prebivalstva v majhnem mestu v severovzhodni Italiji. Analizira ponovno uporabo in domestifikacijo vsakodnevnih javnih prostorov, da bi raziskal, kako je *bidesh* (tujina) preobrazena v *shodesh*, prostor domačnosti. Vzporedni proces ponovne uporabe poteka tudi v zasebni sferi. V vedno težjih ekonomskih pogojih zadovoljujejo družinsko usmerjene potrebe priseljencev različne oblike sobivanja. Proces ni brez protislovij. Na primer, ponovna združitev družine omogoča moškim, da okrepijo pomembno sestavino svojega emocionalnega sveta in pozdravijo osamljenost, ki jo povzroči migracija. Za ženske pa lahko združitev družine pomeni, da doživljajo svoj novi dom kot ambivalentni prostor samote. Članek osvetljuje tudi razliko v razumevanju »doma« in »domovine« med moškimi in ženskami, da bi lahko pojasnil razvoj njihovih načinov, kako »se počutijo doma«.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: bangladeška diaspora, severovzhodna Italija, spol, ustvarjanje doma, vsakodnevno življenje

¹ PhD in Social Sciences, Visiting Researcher, School of Humanities, University of Nova Gorica, Vipavska cesta 13, Rožna Dolina, SI-5000 Nova Gorica, Slovenian Migration Institute, Novi trg 2, SI-1000 Ljubljana, e-mail: francesco.dellapuppa@unive.it

HOME-MAKING AND FEELING AT HOME AWAY FROM HOME

An increasing number of sociological papers focus on the creation and transformation of domestic spaces by migrant populations.

Sometimes, this dimension of the migratory experience is analyzed by relating a wide set of home-making practices to the emotional construction of “feeling at home”. These practices range from mundane details such as furniture styles and the informal organization of living spaces, to large-scale trends such as the patterns of home ownership by migrant populations; the implications of the everyday construction of domesticity “away from home” and its imaginary signification are increasingly becoming the object of sociological studies (Boccagni 2013).

Home-making is a multifaceted experience and practice that shapes the meaning of dwelling and unfolds through different processes of spatial appropriation. Whether in search of short-term accommodation in foreign (often, hostile) settings or in the attempt to symbolically assert migrants’ background and heritage, a heterogeneous set of territory-making practices in different fields (Davis 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2014) and re-functionalization dynamics revolve around domestic spaces (Boccagni and Brighenti 2014).

Some authors (Cingolani 2012; Scandolin 2012), for example, have explored how the home-making practices of migrant and subaltern populations show a strong symbolic investment, with which it seeks to counter the looming sense of insecurity in a deprived and disadvantaged and living context marked by impermanence and exploitation. In fact, an element that usually occurs in this field of studies is the dialectic between stabilization and temporariness (Bonomo and Marzorati 2012), between “feeling at home” and “feeling in exile” (Kusenbach 2014), the ambivalence of living in a “provisional permanent” (Sayad 1999).

Other scientific contributions have interpreted the home-making, investigating how the boundaries between public and private spaces are established, affirmed and transformed in the everyday life of migrants (Della Puppa and Gelati 2015; Minora 2012; Ostanel 2012). In this case, attention is focused on the worship places re-shaped and re-created by migrants. It is indeed important to look at the processes of symbolic and material appropriation of social spaces by migrants outside the house, but also at the dynamics of social and housing segregation within the urban spaces (Smets 2014) and the “effect of places” (Bourdieu 1993) on the migrants’ social trajectories. Interactions (and even conflicts) between natives and newcomers leads to an ongoing redefinition of (ethnic, identity, and relational) boundaries (Marzorati 2014).

This article, specifically, deals with the housing strategies and changing living styles of the Bangladeshi population in a small town in north-eastern Italy. The re-use and “domestication” of everyday public spaces – as a way of exploring how *bidesh* (foreign-land) space is transformed into a *shodesh*, home-like space – will be analyzed, as well as the parallel process of re-functionalization that occurs in the private sphere.

METHODOLOGY

This article stems from a larger research project aimed at investigating the transformations of the masculinity, the gender construction in migration and the process of family reunification of immigrant men from Bangladesh in Italy (Della Puppa 2014a; Della Puppa 2014b).

Between March 2009 and April 2011, I conducted extended periods of ethnographic research in Italy (almost two years) and Bangladesh (over two months) and conducted 74 in-depth interviews in both poles of migration. This was preceded by an examination of quantitative data from the Statistical Office of the City of Montecchio Maggiore.

In Italy and elsewhere in Europe, I interviewed 25 immigrants who have rejoined their families in Alte Ceccato and 15 stakeholders; in Bangladesh, I interviewed 19 relatives of the respondents in Italy, 10 persons whose families have been affected by different experiences of migration and 5 stakeholders.

In Italy, the interviews were conducted in the language chosen by the interviewees, either English or Italian. In Bangladesh, the interviews were conducted in English, sometimes talking directly with the interviewees and sometimes through the help of an interpreter/translator from Bangla to English and vice versa. I have decided to present the words of the respondents without any modifications or corrections, to leave unchanged the small grammatical inaccuracies and the frequent use of words in Bangla.

To produce this article, the data have been integrated with several walk-about (Räthzel 2007), led by several Bangladeshi immigrants residing in Alte, in some parts of the town considered particularly significant by them and by me.

Finally, some superficial observations have been made in other places that are important hubs of the Bangladeshi diaspora.¹ In Italy, the Roman belt periphery, the urban area of Monfalcone (Gorizia), the area adjacent to the Mestre (Venice) train station and some neighborhoods of Marghera (Venice), and other towns of the Chiampo Valley (Vicenza), especially Arzignano. Elsewhere in Europe, the area of Tower Hamlet, in the East End of London, and the area surrounding the famous Brick Lane. During the trip to Bangladesh, it was used as an opportunity for brief encounters with Bangladeshi workers employed on construction sites and in luxury hotels in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and in contact with some of their compatriots in Europe.

ALTE CECCATO. FROM URBANISED LAND TO ITALY'S NORTH-EASTERN "BANGLATOWN"

Alte Ceccato is a hamlet of Montecchio Maggiore, Province of Vicenza. Here, in the 50s, manufacturer Pietro Ceccato decided to construct a "company town" designed to house workers of his emerging industry: the Ceccato Spa and a hasty and messy expansion of houses, the number of which, from the very first housing construction in 1950, grew rapidly up to 229 units in only five years. In the decades following the death of the entrepreneur, blocks of flats were erected to house workers who migrated from other areas of the province and from the south of Italy.

The intensive traffic affecting the area, the difficulty in creating social spaces as well as the lacking renovation of many housing units resulted in a few years in a significant depopulation, highlighting a number of critical aspects of the irrational urban planning, not at all harmonious and left solely up to the private sector.

The hamlet thus started becoming a commuter area until it finally became a marginal centre lacking social life, a temporary accommodation and a place of passage in the industrial outskirts of a region that, in the meanwhile, was heading toward a dizzying economic growth (Della Puppa and Gelati 2015).

In the 80s, the industrial area of the Chiampo Valley actually continued flourishing, and tanning of hides and leather became its main productive activity. This area became the most important tannery district in Italy and perhaps in Europe. With a workforce composed of more than 50% immigrants, the Vicenza tannery district was responsible – until the economic crisis – for 1% of the Italian GDP, generating 20% of European and 70% of Italian production (3 billion euros per year).

1 In this article, the Bangladeshi migration has been defined in terms of a *diaspora*. For further information about this concept, see Brubaker 2005; Clifford 1997; Cohen 1997; Gilroy 1993; Hall 1990. For more information about the Bangladeshi diaspora in the world, see Kibria 2011. For a rapid insight in the specific segment of such diaspora in Italy, see Della Puppa 2014a; Knights 1998; Priori 2012; Zeitlyn 2006.

This productive system attracted large sections of the workforce from all over the country and abroad. This area and Montecchio Maggiore itself are, indeed, characterised by a high rate of immigrant residents (20%). In the village of Alte, non-Italian citizens represent about one third of its 6,804 inhabitants, 50% of whom are from Bangladesh (38% of whom are women).

The Bangladeshi community today represents the sixth largest non-European community in Italy, counting between 100,000 and 150,000 members (Priori 2012). Until the 90s, Bangladeshis were concentrated almost exclusively in Rome (92%) (Knights 1998), but within a decade different “Banglatowns” came into being in many local contexts, usually close to major industrial centres in northern regions (Morad and Gombač 2015), such as Alte Ceccato.

Despite its small size, Alte has gradually acquired such an importance for the Bangladeshi migration in Italy that in the colloquial constructions and in the everyday speech of the *probashi*² themselves, it is proudly referred to as to the “Bangla-Capital” of the province: “Alte is the capital, Alte is like a capital. Our capital. [...] We now say “Banglatown”.

It should be emphasized that one of the main factors crucial for the Bangladeshi settlement in Alte was the process of “familisation” that was characterized by an ever increasing number of family reunifications.

STRATEGIES AND WAYS OF LIVING IN DIASPORA

Through an ethnographic look at the *probashi* houses, it is not difficult to imagine the lives of the working class families that had lived there four decades before the Bangladeshi settlement. The apartments and buildings reflected, in structure and interior design, the rules of aesthetics and organisation of the houses of Italy in the 1950s, responding to the needs of their new residents who were adapting them to their needs through new dietary, religious and social life practices.

These accommodations, clearly marked by time and wear and tear, were more accessible for the immigrant population thanks to their lower value assessments, and through the high rate of property acquisition, a synchronic process of increase and decrease in the value of residential properties. The intensity which shaped this transition together with the total lack of renovation affecting the neighbouring spaces immediately resulted in the creation of a speculative market in residential structures which by then had become residual and not very “attractive” for the native population. The initial disparity between rental costs and sales prices and easy granting of mortgages to immigrant borrowers who had been hired for an indefinite period by the tannery had encouraged a rapid turnover of tenants, which led to the consolidation of a dense and limited residential *enclave*. This resulted in a rigidly differentiated territorial distribution with a high level of immigrant residents gathered in the central area of the hamlet, contrasted with a decidedly lower number of non-Italian citizens further on along the new residential areas at the edge of the town. This form of residential segregation, which results today in 83% of the Bangladeshi population living in ten streets and representing an absolute majority in some of them, in addition to generating processes of the previously mentioned decrease and increase in value, produced a dual housing market based on the use of kinship and friendship networks:

There are two three Bengali persons, right? Always they search house: which houses sells who, which house I rent, in which house is free person, right? We call him... because I need house. All right you come, there is a house of my friend. Like an agency really! You understand? Like this... we don't go to agency.

(Tariq)

2 In the Bangla language, the “outside inhabitants”, those “who went out”, the “emigrants”.

You asked before why didn't go to agency. For example, you find a house directly from your friend, why go to agency? Why pay money to agency? I know you, you want rent your house. You don't want agency, you give me the house.

(Amin)

Integration of the data from the registry office and the ethnographic observations allows us to make an initial indicative classification of the *probashi* way of living in Alte Ceccato, often compromised by economic difficulties exacerbated by the economic crisis.

First, there is a major proportion (about 130 cases) of so-called "nuclear" families, composed of husband, wife and children living in their own houses or in rented houses.

Secondly, the presence of "extended" families was established, which includes the added presence of cohabiting family members bound by kinship ties. Usually it is the husband's younger brother, but there are also other types of family ties, still declined along the male line (in-laws, cousins, uncles, etc.). In these cases the real estate ownership rate is higher and reflects the more ancient migration style. It is also common to see a cohabiting person that does not seem to have any ties with the nuclear family. It is difficult to register this kind of situation in the registry and it is often attributable to temporary accommodation, irregular rents and temporary and unstable conditions, marked by forms of solidarity – or speculation – among fellow countrymen.

In addition, about 50 living spaces were identified in which different family units lived together. Most of them involve families who are not bound by any kind of relationship, however, raising teenage children, nowadays, is giving rise to households composed of different generations of the same family: parents, eldest son and his newly married wife with whom he was reunited. Here the rate of the purchased properties is very high, and this is due to the expenses related to the mortgage, which forces many family units to live together in this way.

Finally, there are cases where young unmarried male workers share the same household: approximately a dozen apartments displayed these characteristics, even if it is difficult to demonstrate the reliability of this data. It is related to a great extent to cohabitation between Bangladeshi citizens, but in some cases the apartment can also be shared among immigrants of different nationalities. In these situations the tenants are rarely the owners of the houses. These accommodations are often made available by Bangladeshis who are still residents or who have emigrated in the meantime.

Therefore, there is not a clear division between *households* (residential units which house a more or less extended family composed of more or less close relatives) and *bachelors' houses* (temporary accommodations and often overcrowded by unmarried workers or newcomers) (Pompeo 2011). Nevertheless, the existence of some elements could be noted (cohabitation of multiple family units, extended families living together, renting under the table and sublets, incidences of temporary irregularities) which are satisfactory for the mutual interest of single-income families and young precarious or unemployed newcomers.

This gives shape to the clientele logic and intra-community speculation dynamics emerging in the opacity of networks and fellow-countrymen social capital. Indeed, along with the situations in which the subletting, based on ties of friendship and solidarity, does not involve any profiteering, other situations emerge which are based on the drainage of disproportionate amounts of money from the pockets of roommates or tenants.

The secondary role here assumed by the bachelors' houses and, at the same time, the support function of the "owned houses", reflects the specificity of the *bidesh*³ of Alte Ceccato: a secondary settlement with respect to Rome, representing a strong family stabilisation.

3 In the Bangla language the "foreign land", "foreign country", as opposed to Bangla-desh, "The country/land where Bangla is spoken". The latter would be the *shodesh*, i.e. "native land" or "motherland".

NEW STYLES OF INHABITING URBAN SPACES IN ORDER TO FEEL AT HOME

The rooting of the new inhabitants, apart for having decisively contributed to combating social desertification and the demographic decline of the hamlet, led to a re-signification of its urban spaces and brought back a “primary dimension” of the “street and neighbourhood”. This way of living spaces and the territory of immigration is most pronounced in the central St Paul’s Square, the only town square and the heart of the Bangladeshi community social life.

What is sometimes represented as the “square of foreigners” is profiled as a “masculinised” area characterised mainly by the presence of Bangladeshi men. The latter are pushed to spend much of their time in public spaces due to the housing conditions experienced by many immigrant families of Alte Ceccato, where sharing the same apartment by multiple families represents a strategy for controlling expenditures. The domestic space becomes insufficient to satisfy the needs of all the tenants, thus pushing the male component (which in itself is the most entitled to engage in the public sphere) outside.

The slim possibilities of living in affordable houses that would be large enough push immigrants to pour into the squares, along the pavements and close to the shops run by fellow countrymen, which function as “relational knots”, crossroads of exchanges of information, decision-making centres, places of political debate and community affiliation (Ibid). It is especially in public spaces that fellow countrymen can meet without being obliged to use economic resources for consumption in bars and in public establishments – which also occurs but sparingly and prudently:

First thing we not go to the bar so much because we not drink and [so] here we discuss how life goes, where to find work, every group [associative] to hear about new laws [about immigration], what to hear, where is work place, where they need people, what problems at home, how things go in my country, what happen in politics, what government... Like this... Also just to talk with fellow countrymen.

(Samad)

Moving away from the town centre and heading towards the residential areas of town, places densely filled by mansions exclusively occupied by locals, one arrives at the only green area of the hamlet: Don Milani Park, renamed by the Bangladeshi people as “Burqa Park”, as it is regularly visited by veiled mothers who meet and accompany there their children to play.

This park is an intimate and secluded place, far away from the eyes of men. A space that is in contrast to the visibility and public nature (and thus potentially “inconvenient”, according to the cultural and religious construction which is socially represented as “traditional”, and intended to standardise the relations between the genders) of the square.

The “veiled” park is the only space used by the Bangladeshi population in this part of Alte. It is precisely thanks to its intimate isolation from the rest of the Bangladeshi community and from the male part of the community more “in sight” (concentrated at the square and in its adjacent streets) that the park becomes a “legitimate” place, in which the presence of women not accompanied by their husbands is acceptable and which can be frequented also by wives of immigrants paying more attention to the separation between genders and to a strict abidance by the rules of conduct designated by *purdah*.⁴

So, St Paul’s Square is the place where especially the Bangladeshi male population meets up and shows off, discussing the political life of their country of origin and exchanging information regarding the latest regulations on immigration in Italy or on employment opportunities in Italy, comparing their

4 Literally “veil” or “curtain”, referring to a set of incorporated practices that, in the Muslim world and the Indian subcontinent, contributes to the construction of “modesty”, “honor” and “shame” and preserves the separation, symbolic or material, of the genders and spheres of activity gendered through clothing, daily practices, the structuring of domestic environments, and physical segregation.

daily lives in diaspora and showing off their little sons in front of their compatriots. In Don Milani Park, it is possible to experience a strong differentiation of functions and uses depending on the different generational affiliation and gender of visitors. In the summer mornings and afternoons during the working days, mothers bring there their children to play; in the later hours, however, the park benches host card games between Bangladeshi adolescents; on Sundays, however, men organise barbecues and picnics for families, friends or associations. In both cases, such reconfiguration of the style of living in the hamlet reflects an attempt, put in place through the practices of everyday life by the *probashi* part of residents, to feel at home even in *bidesh*.

LIVING THE DIASPORA. AN INTRA-COMMUNITY TOPONYMY IN ORDER TO FEEL AT HOME

The houses of immigrant families in Alte, as mentioned, are often composed of apartments in buildings built in the 50s for the workers of Ceccato. Among these blocks of flats the “White House” – one of the most dilapidated of these buildings – assumes particular importance. Its name is prompted by its colour and it is known among the whole Bangladeshi community in the province as a reference point for housing for the newly arrived countrymen, a first landing before undertaking a subsequent and gradual stabilisation.

In this apartment building, which is home to 98 Bangladeshi residents, including families which own the flats and young people living in rentals, there are currently 180 people from 12 different countries and 3 continents. They transform this space into a small window onto the world along the road of Alte Ceccato. The White House (officially called the “Monte Berico Apartment Building”) is characterised by incidents of overcrowding, unreported hospitality⁵ and very high residential mobility (Della Puppa and Gelati 2015).

In similar buildings, the leaders of the Bangladeshi associations and leaders of interest groups act as providers, managing the rents of some accommodations occupied by fellow countrymen. Many owners of the apartments in the White House or in similar blocks of flats are *probashi* who, after living for years in Alte Ceccato, where they bought some property on the property market informally reserved for the immigrant population, moved to other diasporic settlement areas (usually in the UK) or returned to their country of origin. In both cases, they received income from the rents, representing an additional contribution for those who have extended their migratory path beyond the Channel or a considerable amount of capital to be collected on a monthly basis for those who returned to their homeland. At the same time, however, the White House represents for the Bangladeshi population from the oldest settlement an emergency and residual housing solution, thus carrying a social stigma and a symbolic devaluation of its residents (Bourdieu 1993).

The White House and the aforementioned Burqa Park constitute the main elements of a new toponymy that has transformed the spaces of Alte Ceccato and its activities. These activities have also helped to transform the significance of the places.

The *probashi* community contributes to the construction of the intra-community lexicon – i.e. simply renaming some places in the town in an original way – so as to be able to speak at the same time of themselves and the milieu, of the Bangladeshi community in diaspora and the context of the settlement in Alte Ceccato. Hence, in addition to the new names given to the “Monte Berico Apartment Building” and “Don Milani Park”, the two big buildings of the same height rising up in front of the White

5 That is to say, the people actually domiciled in the apartments rent them to fellow countrymen, who are not registered as residents at the registration office of the municipality of Montecchio Maggiore.

House become the “Twin Towers”, because of their symmetry and for their contraposition to the “White House”. The second building next to the White House is the “Red House”, while on the other side of the street stands the “Yellow House”. Finally, secluded on the outer side of the road dividing Alte Ceccato from Montecchio Maggiore – opposite the Bangladeshi kebab retailer, but mostly far away from the community public social life that is taking place mainly at St Paul’s Square – can be found the “Bottle Building”. At the feet of this building, the pavement is often littered with empty bottles because many Bangladeshis, often young bachelors or husbands who have not yet been reunited with their wives, meet in the evenings to consume alcohol. This practice is banned by Islam and formally stigmatised by the community in which the vast majority declares themselves Muslim.

This process of the redefinition of the places in the hamlet can be understood as an attempt to re-appropriate the settlement context. A strategy of readjustment of their everyday situation with respect to their needs of life, a way to “furnish” it with words, renaming it in a new way, in order to form a “habitat of significance” (Hannerz 1996) and to feel a little bit more at home. By narrating the world in which we live, in fact, it becomes tame – it is rendered domestic, it becomes *home* – and one takes care of some of its parts so that they become, even in the diaspora, familial, so that they do not provoke wonder or fear.

This is the direction towards which the new definitions of the places of Alte and the stories that are being exchanged among the Bangladeshi population about those places are heading, inasmuch as the familiarity is gained through the new shared language. It is possible to assume a common identity *inside* and *through* this language in a space that was unfamiliar, a perspective allowing the internalisation of the transition from the *shodesh* to a *bidesh* and transforming the *bidesh* in the familiar land.

At the same time, it is clear that the lexicon used by the *probashi* community to narrate their own context of life in order to make it “home” is rooted in a fictional English-speaking world towards which it is oriented. In Bangladesh, indeed, the language of the former coloniser is seen as a key to the world and, therefore, as a multiplier of the chances of success. In particular, English being the privilege of the educated middle-high class, it represents an unmistakable sign of social distinction. Hence, the process put in place by the Bangladeshi residents of Alte to recover, at least partially, the feeling of home in the diaspora constitutes a reaffirmation of their original social status in the country of origin and a form of symbolic resistance to the downgrading inherent in the south-north migration which they experience (Della Puppa 2014a).

FEELING AT HOME IN ALTE CECCATO. A RIGHT DENIED?

The social vitality and the leading role played by the immigrant component of the population seem to clash, however, with the implicit desire of the “host” society and its political institutions. Even if they initially tolerated the presence of immigrants in the light of their “productive” function, they would prefer them to continue being invisible and discreet, with no needs and initiatives, and this even now when the “labour migration” has evolved into a “family settlement”.

The representation of the Bangladeshi presence as an element of concern has led to the implementation of a series of measures by local institutions. These measures have focused, among other things, particularly on the issue of housing.

The first project to be mentioned, although it was never completed due to the change in the administration in 2009, is “Montecchio Si-cura”. This project aimed mainly at resolving, according to its author’s definitions, the need of the “public health”, “security” and “order” of the native population with respect to the “occupation” of the houses and the public spaces by immigrants now too numerous in the eyes of the administration.

It was structured along two lines: the first one was oriented towards social and educational measures; the second one, which included the involvement of law enforcement, focused on the side of repression in order to preserve “urban safety”.⁶

The first set of activities has never been completed, and so only that part was fulfilled which provided for the expanding of the requirements for obtaining an approval of the suitability of accommodation for immigrant residents (and, hence, also for obtaining the permission for family reunification), the organisation of “widespread and repeated controls on the territory by the municipal police”, “an extension of the patrolling schedule”, and the creation of a detached section of the municipal police in Alte. The philosophy of the project or of the only component that has been developed and materialised, is best summed up by the statements of the then mayor:

It is well known that Alte, not only on the grounds of the traffic circulation and urban planning, but also on the grounds of the social fabric, is a different area from the rest of the country: it cannot be concealed that a large presence of non-EU immigrants represent problems in terms of civic order. [...] By conducting at least ten document checks per day, we give a strong signal: it is a clear message for illegal immigrants and criminals to stay out of Montecchio.

Thus, at the end of 2007, municipal police started to carry out night searches of homes and the Ulss 5 (Territorial Health Service) started conducting controls of the sanitary conditions of the apartments inhabited by immigrants. The controls were mainly concentrated in the central streets of Alte, on the one hand fuelling the distrust of the native population residing there and leading to a realisation that the context in which they live is problematic and besieged and, on the other hand, fear and a sense of insecurity among immigrants and a feeling of not “being at home” but of filling the role of “uninvited guests”.

In June 2009, the Municipality of Montecchio Maggiore experienced a radical change of administration: the previous municipal council was defeated by a handful of votes and replaced by a majority led by the xenophobic Northern League.⁷

The new administration has among its actions envisaged the removal of a part of the street furniture of the territory, which was socially built as a place of deviance, as a meeting point and a public space for socializing for immigrant residents (precisely the benches at in front of the White House); the installation of a camera system for video-monitoring in St Paul’s Square; narrowing access to the premises of the Muslim prayer room; the interruption of the provision of the “canteen service” at schools for (almost all immigrant) families who cannot provide for the payment of fees; an ordinance that, for drafting and dissemination of notifications or publications by individuals, groups or associations addressed to the population in a language other than Italian, a translation into Italian must be delivered to the mayor’s offices one week in advance; further enlargement of the housing requirements for obtaining approval of the suitability of accommodation, residences and, once again, the renewal of residence permits and authorisations for family reunification.

These measures were followed by numerous controls – more than 200 according to figures provided by the municipality – which, as a result of the new parameters, were carried out night and day in the private homes of many residents of Bangladeshi origin (even residents with formal Italian citizenship and passports) according to a well-defined *ethnic profiling*. The result of this was a situation of widespread discrimination and a climate of insecurity. In this way many immigrant residents are dispossessed of the opportunity to use their real estate and to become homeowners (or to pay the instalments of the loan for their purchase) that will turn out to be “unfit” to accommodate all the members of

6 “Montecchio Si-cura” is a pun in Italian and refers to two directions along which it should be structured: that of “security” (“sicura”, meaning safe in Italian) and that of “taking care” (“si cura”) of its municipality.

7 Election results also reconfirmed in 2014.

the reunited family. The municipal resolutions on housing draw legal and symbolic borders inside the homes of immigrant families, establishing who is entitled to live and enjoy those spaces and who does not have the right to feel at home, and outlining a citizenship stratified with respect to “ethnic” categories, “cultural-linguistic” categories and categories of national origin (Benhabib 2003; Morris 2003) and access to the rights to variable geometry (Zagato 2007).

THE HOUSE IN THE DIASPORA, “A HAVEN IN A HEARTLESS WORLD”...

The first generation of *probashi* in Italy, to which many Bangladeshi residents of Alte belong, was composed almost entirely of men, often unmarried: urban middle-high class young men or rural well-off family members. Family reunifications characterising the first phase of the Bangladeshi diaspora in Italy are, thus, configured exclusively as “masculine” reunifications and of “second degree” or “newly formed” (Tognetti Bordogna 2005). This definition refers to the situation where the first generation migrant, after setting up the necessary conditions, returns to the country of origin to get married, most of the time via an arranged marriage with an often unknown woman who, soon after the wedding, re-joins her husband in immigration. It should also be clarified that in order to implement their wedding projects, the migrants must abide by time constraints resulting from work commitments, using their own holidays. This means that as soon as the marriage is celebrated, they must return to Italy, where they are called to clock in at the workplace (Della Puppa 2014a) and wait for the processing of the paperwork necessary for the reunion. One of the main drives for reunification is the need of “emotional stability” of the first generation immigrant men, their willingness to create and foster an emotional sphere also in the context of immigration.

Reduced to mere labour for factories in the district, over the years migrants start to feel the weight of the lack of an everyday family life and domestic warmth, emotional loneliness and boredom that accompanies the “free” time inside and outside their homes:

My life, before was different: I was alone here. When your family is far from you, in another country like Bangladesh, and you're here, you can't see them... I can't speak with my wife, I can't affection at her. I was always alone. I was unhappy, I had mental frustration: “When she will come here? When she will come here?” [...] I married about ten years ago and still now I cannot bring her here. So many tensions created in my mind.
(Mukul)

For migrants alone in Italy, the everyday life prior to the reunification is remembered as irregular, chaotic, compromised by a sense of temporariness and insecurity related to the absence of an emotional reference by their side, the impossibility of a routine marked by constraints, timetables and family responsibilities; an existence more resembling survival than living. In addition, the disorganisation of the domestic sphere that characterises their housing conditions exacerbates their sense of existential loneliness and their feeling of being “provisional” and “temporary”:

My life changed a lot. Before... always out talking to friends. Now I must arrive home soon because she alone waiting me, I must come back, go out together. Day working, evening going out. Before I was eating eight, nine, ten, eleven o'clock, no problem. Now, twelve o'clock lunch, eight o'clock dinner. Arranged. Settled. Stable.
(Rahaman)

Life needs stability, I need calm life. If I live with friends, in his house, not OK, I don't like it. Before, I didn't have my house, I don't like to be with other people. Not regular. I like regular life, but I lived with other people. Like in one room many people, me and my friends. Life with mess not good for me, now OK.
(Hassan)

The desire to reunite also arises from the need for daily organisation and conciliation between time of productive and reproductive work, from the thrust towards an adjustment of the daily lived *routine* to the ideal model of domestic and family planning, and economic and work planning:

For me a family, a house, is a fantastic thing! You come home after work and wife arranges to keep house. For example when I was alone, I must clean house, I cook, doing everything me. But now I come home and my wife keeps house, arranges everything, a bit for me... it is like a surprise every day!

(Sherif)

After the reunification the domestic sphere finally becomes a space for relaxation and recreation. The time outside working hours allows for moments of uncommon "normality" and re-joined husbands begin to feel at home even in Alte Ceccato.

...OR A GOLDEN CAGE AND ALL-ABSORBING PLACE?

For a re-joined woman, however, migration to Italy following her new husband can be understood as a continuation – in a transnational space – of her transition from the family group of the father to that of the husband (and/or of the father-in-law), as it is enshrined in the marriage accomplished in accordance with the virilocal rule generally applicable in Bangladesh. This interfamily shift – and now also intercontinental – allows them to "build new families with small pieces of the previous ones, which therefore had to be broken" (Lévi-Strauss 1952: 175).

The wife, after living the shock of migrating from her living and family context, has to face the trauma of migration for reunification purposes. The women may become variously destabilised after arrival to Alte: their migration overlaps with a time of major transition due to multiple changes of *status* and sudden changes in the social, family and living environment, causing pain and disorientation, loneliness and suffering:

On 26 August 2006 I arrived in Italy. That day was very sad in my life: I had to leave father, mother, sister, brother, grandfather, grandmother, cousins, all the things that I liked. I never wanted to stay in Italy too long, but... I happened to be in Italy. Italy is a new country, without my friends, I've never been with my husband for more than a month. [...] I attended a new school to learn Italian. But I always want to go back to Bangladesh, to go to school with my friends. When I came to Italy I realised that my life had changed so much.

(Rokeya)

When she came, first two years she didn't want to stay here, she used to tell me: "Send me in Bangladesh, send me back!" I was trying to let her understand: "If I need money to live, I have to work here. So if I have to work and to live here, you will stay here". So after that, little by little, she became to understand. [...] She missed Bangladesh too much; I think more than me, every time she was telling: "Send me back, send me back". This is the situation.

(Jahan)

To fully understand the condition of the reunited wives in Alte, it is necessary to linger over some aspects.

In the country of origin, women were spending their days within the relational context of the enlarged family of the absent husband. On the one hand, this may lead to the subordination to the power of the mother-in-law, the sisters-in-law and, more generally, of the other family members; on the other hand, her husband's family can provide the bride with a dense relational network and not necessarily a segregated one: the women of the household may, in fact, become bound by ties of trust and complicity. The rigid hierarchy among the members of the family of origin of the husband,

the control and oppression to which the young daughter-in-law would be subjected, can coexist and become reconciled by means of bonds of solidarity, domestic warmth and family protection.

So, once in Alte Ceccato, for the reunited women, the vivacity of family ties and familiarity of the environment of origin may give way to the thinning out of social networks and the solitude of a yellowish room or a dilapidated apartment where young brides suddenly have to live with a husband who is a complete stranger or with whom there was no way and no time to build intimacy. The same husbands describe the suffering of the wives that, after being alone throughout the day, they may have only a few moments in the company of the spouse who

comes home exhausted after the endless work shifts:

In Bangladesh she lived one type of life, but in Italy she has to live another one: husband works all day, in the night or in the evening he comes back home and he's too much tired, after dinner he go to bed and the woman feel a little frustrate. Frustration, because her time is just passing: husband working all day, evening he takes food and go to bed, woman in all day at home, she feels problem to pass her time until night when come husband, perhaps one hour they meet each other, than husband go to bed and women nothing to do.

(Reevu)

Alte Ceccato – an orthogonal grid of streets upon which loom large apartment buildings scarred by the ravages of time, the dormitory appendix of the biggest Italian tannery district, nowadays in decline as well – certainly does not correspond to the ideal of modern and cosmopolitan Europe described by migrants returning to Bangladesh or represented by images of the UK satellite channels which, however, refer to London.

So, the reunited women are forced to see the real face of the migration and unveil the lies, omissions and ostentations that reproduce illusions about the land of immigration in the country of origin (Sayad 1999). This misconception concerns the living and social context of the integration of the first generation immigrants and their wives, but also the downgrading, the exclusion from work and the difficult socio-material conditions experienced by them:

Before coming here I didn't think that life here wasn't easy, I thought it would be different. I heard my cousins who work in America and in England, they work in the office because they have studied, there can be found good work, while in Italy it isn't so. Although I studied, it is not easy here. It is difficult that someone would accept me to work in the office, even though I speak English very well, because I am a foreigner and, therefore, no one will give me a work as a shop assistant or in the office. When I think that my job is to clean, I feel bad because in Bangladesh I would never have to do this job never, never, never... I did not expect this life.

(Razeeta)

The "family" migration transfers onto wives the same bitter disappointment that the husbands also experienced at the time of their arrival in Italy. From educated daughters of the Bangladeshi upper middle class, used to the comfortable life and to the prestige of their social position, they suddenly happen to be wives of unskilled workers, on the bottom rungs of the civic stratification, confined in cold apartments in a neighbourhood among factories. They are immersed in an urban and socio-territorial environment and into a life they will have more difficulties getting used to than their husbands, and more difficulties perceiving as a space within which they can feel at home.

CONCLUSIONS

From the arrival of hundreds of young male workers previously employed in different urban contexts in the Italian peninsula, in order to reach a gradual “familiarization” of the immigrant component, Alte Ceccato has established itself as a territory of immigration. Despite its small size it welcomed a high-impact social transformation that has helped to change, with its resident population, the image of the hamlet, its public and private spaces, styles and forms of living these spaces and make them “home”.

Hence, the hamlet presents itself as a case study to illustrate the transformations whose protagonists are the “little local contexts” as a result of the intensive settlement of migrant populations, with the inevitable conflicts that ensue. But, above all, it constitutes a socio-territorial tissue which is almost ideal-typical for observing the processes of symbolic and material reusing and recycling of urban and domestic spaces and for seizing the practice of readapting the context of life adopted by the immigrant residents, in order to create the conditions in which they can feel at home in the diaspora.

Examples of the reported re-signification and renaming of places confirm these trends: unknown to the indigenous population, they represent a clear sense of belonging, imprinting a strong identity value to the frequented spaces and contributing to the symbolic “domestication” of the life context, redesigning an original map through which a culture of living gives voice to its inhabitants.

At the same time, the housing strategies and the strategies for coping with criticality adopted by the immigrant population are not without contradictions, and reflect, through the risk of social withdrawal in the community, barriers and already existing problems. This refers not as much to the examples of such coexistence between different families – the only way to cope with the costs of a mortgage taken out with difficulty, but partially unsustainable – as to the speculative actions of informal housing networks that sometimes result in the reproduction of dividing elements and dynamics of dispute within the community.

Within this scenario, access to public space turns out to be an absolutely crucial factor. Indeed, the new face of the locality became more visible in St Paul’s Square and in its adjacent streets, and that is also where the immigrant population lives and transforms the territory, making it (also) its own territory. At the same time, however, it is always in the central square of the hamlet – and to a lesser extent in the green area of Don Milani Park – that the functions for which those spaces were originally designed are re-emerging, and sometimes even their inadequacy with respect to today’s new social needs.

The limits arising again in this way are intertwined with the dynamics typical for the Bangladeshi diaspora and the experience of setting up a family in the migration context, leading to the emergence of new contradictions in the present. If for the first-generation immigrant men, in fact, family reunification allows them to regain an important component of their emotional universe, acting as an antidote to the suffering and loneliness of migration, for the reunited women it can be configured as a symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1998) that forces them to leave their relational network and to be subjected to an often unsatisfactory context. So, if for Bangladeshi husbands the domestic sphere represents the centre of the affections, a privileged space for recreation and regaining a part of their own family dimension, for their wives the perimeter of the house can turn out to be a more or less golden prison and a place of solitude.

This plurality of modes of living in the diaspora implemented by migrants and their families, therefore, highlights the gap between male and female perception with regard to the representations of “home” and “homeland” and the clash between different styles of feeling at home.

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POVZETEK

DOM MED *BIDESH* IN *SHODESH*: DOMESTIFIKACIJA ŽIVLJENJSKIH PROSTOROV, IDENTITETA IN SPOLNE IZKUŠNJE V BANGLADEŠKI DIASPORI

Francesco DELLA PUPPA

Vedno večje število socioloških razprav se ukvarja z ustvarjanjem in preoblikovanjem domačih prostorov migrantskega prebivalstva. Včasih je ta razsežnost migracijske izkušnje analizirana preko soočenja raznovrstnih načinov ustvarjanja doma z emocionalno konstrukcijo »počutiti se doma«. Članek se ukvarja s stanovanjskimi strategijami in spreminjanji življenjskih stilov bangladeškega prebivalstva v majhnem mestu v severovzhodni Italiji v kontekstu velike koncentracije priseljencev in politike nativizma: Alte Ceccato je del Montecchio Maggiore, provinca Vicenza. Za to področje in za Montecchio Maggiore je značilna visoka stopnja priseljenega prebivalstva (20 odstotkov). V naselju Alte predstavljajo neitalijanski državljani tretjino od 6804 prebivalcev, od tega jih je polovica iz Bangladeša in med njimi je 38 odstotkov žensk.

Članek analizira ponovno uporabo in »domestifikacijo« vsakodnevnih javnih prostorov, kot so trgi in parki, da bi raziskal, kako je *bidesh* (tujina v jeziku bangla) preobražena v *shodesh*, prostor domačnosti. Vzporedni proces ponovne uporabe poteka na zasebni ravni, saj postajajo domači prostori in procesi ustvarjanja doma odločilni za preživetje migrantske skupnosti. V vedno težjih ekonomskih pogojih zadovoljujejo družinsko usmerjene potrebe priseljencev različne oblike družinskega sobivanja in rekompozicije. Proces ni brez protislovij. Na primer, ponovna združitve družine omogoča moškim, da okrepijo pomembno sestavino svojega emocionalnega sveta in pozdravijo osamljenost, ki jo povzroči migracija. Za ženske pa lahko združitve družine pomeni, da doživljajo svoj novi dom kot ambivalentno »zlato kletko« ali kraj samote. Članek osvetljuje tudi razliko v razumevanju »doma« in »domovine« med moškimi in ženskami, da bi lahko pojasnil razvoj njihovih načinov, kako »se počutijo doma«.