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Why Mahmud can't be a pilot

Naeem Mohaiemen reflects on the post 9-11 tensions of the Muslim immigrant diaspora in Europe and North America

2005. First warm spring day in New York. A group gathered at a West Village Italian: Bangladeshi professionals around the table, not my usual crowd of activists, artists, and troublemakers. Bonuses, overtime hours, conference calls, performance reviews, commodities, emerging markets, derivatives. As I listen to the flow of chatter, I search for words to hold on to -- a mnemonic device to keep me in the conversation.

The occasion is the return of a few people from holiday vacation in Dhaka. A management consultant had gone home to get married and we are celebrating his return with new bride. Two decades back, when I came to the US, this sort of winter-migration was very common. People in Dhaka joked that these returnees were "winter birds returning for a bride." Over time this has shifted, as more and more women are also coming to America on their own, rather than waiting to arrive as somebody's partner. Of course, a sell-by date for marriage comes up for them even before they leave Bangladesh. There are myriad other restrictions and double standards as well.

Even with all these restrictions, we have a roughly gender-equal table. Except for the new bride, every woman here originally came to the U.S. to study. But there are still strange rules about "appropriate jobs" for the women. Most of the men work on Wall Street, many of the women seem to be in marketing jobs. Temperamentally, the men are a bit removed from Michael Lewis's "big swinging dick"[1] archetype, but they dominate the conversation.

Everyone is bullish about things back in Bangladesh. Those freshly returned from vacation bring back excitement about a country going through rapid industrialization. *Things are happening in Dhaka now, I'm thinking*