

2024-06-19

# Radha is Crowned King

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Kolotan, N. N. (2024). Radha is crowned king (Master's thesis, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada). Retrieved from <https://prism.ucalgary.ca>.

<https://hdl.handle.net/1880/119051>

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Radha is Crowned King

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

CALGARY, ALBERTA

JUNE, 2024

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## Abstract

This thesis project celebrates 2SLGBTQIA+ Bangladeshi people. I am a Bangladeshi person and a Canadian citizen who is part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. This thesis consists of three painted portraits titled *Radha is Crowned King* that portray Bharatnatyam dance positions which convey the love described by famous Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam about the deity partners Radha and Krishna. Through culturally recognizable and significant gestures, the figures swap genders. Through this gender swap, the paintings represent diversity in gender that one can embody.

South Asian artists who utilize storytelling to share 2SLGBTQIA+ experiences, have informed the way in which my work resists dehumanization of Bangladeshi LGBTQIA+ people. Artists Vivek Shraya, Salman Toor, Ruhul Abdin, and Tara Asgar are telling queer stories through their visual art and writing. Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote the poem *Shoke She Hari Kemon Bol* that is about being passionately in love, and that inspired this thesis. *Radha is Crowned King* confronts the audience with fluidity of gender adding to this collective depth of 2SLGBTQIA+ storytelling, through my queer truth and narrative.

This work consists of painting which allows for the creation and illustration of a world where gender hybridity and fluidity exists and is celebrated despite discrimination in the real world. This work is informed by cultural understanding and familial knowledge. This work is also informed by the book *Queering Autoethnography* by Stacy Holman Jones and Anne M. Harris, and is invigorated by the historical existence of LGBTQIA+ Bangladeshi people.

Within cis-heteronormative cultures there is dehumanization and discrimination of LGBTQIA+ Bangladeshi people. The significance of this work is to rejoice with and for 2SLGBTQIA+ people and honor our existence and beauty. My work functions to share a narrative of 2SLGBTQIA+ acceptance. It mediates between 2SLGBTQIA+ people and the Bangladeshi masses, contributing to fostering a stronger community that is peaceful and accepting.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Niladri Nirzorini Kolotan.

## Acknowledgements

“The University of Calgary, located in the heart of Southern Alberta, both acknowledges and pays tribute to the traditional territories of the peoples of Treaty 7, which include the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprised of the Siksika, the Piikani, and the Kainai First Nations), the Tsuut’ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney First Nations). The City of Calgary is also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta (Districts 5 and 6).

The University of Calgary is situated on land Northwest of where the Bow River meets the Elbow River, a site traditionally known as Moh’kins’tsis to the Blackfoot, Wíchîspa to the Stoney Nakoda, and Guts’ists’i to the Tsuut’ina. On this land and in this place we strive to learn together, walk together, and grow together “in a good way.”” (“Territorial Land Acknowledgement,” n.d.)

I want to thank the following educational institutions:

Oakridge Public School  
Samuel Hearne Public School  
Wexford Collegiate School for the Arts  
York University  
University of Calgary

Alampiya School of Music  
Menaka Thakkar Dance Company  
Vital Precisions School for Dance  
Nrittha Kala Kendra School for Dance

I am significantly grateful to the following dance and music professors:

Dr. Menaka Thakar  
Saar, Biplob Kar  
Ustad AFM Alimuzzaman

I am especially grateful to my supportive committee:

Professor Heather Leier

Professor Judy Anderson

Professor Dr. Erin Sutherland

Another special thank you to my friends and visual arts teachers:

Terry Wilgosh

Kenny Fong

Tara Manyfingers

Audie Murray

Mridula Bairagi

Kristie Holmes

Lanissa M. Pacheco

Jessie Smith

James Graham

Sara Sabbagh

Chanel Chacon

Helena Musaka

Lexi R. Babb

I am grateful for my family: my grandmother Hafsa Khatun (Lebu); my sister Nishit Proshanti Nirjhum Zonaki; mother's sisters Jannatul Ara and Moni Ujma (my aunts). I love my mother and father; Hasina Zamana (Zafran) and Mohammed A. Quadir (Maq).

A tremendous thank you to my funders, the Alberta Graduate of Excellence Scholarship, and the Suncor Energy Scholarship for the financial support (my father is a Lead Engineer at Suncor Cooperation).

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my first niece, Prinita Ahnaya Proshanti Javed.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction



Figure 1: Niladri Nirzorini Kolotan, *Radha is Crowned King*, 2024, oil and acrylic on panel, 144" x 96"- 96 in, Gallery 621, University of Calgary.

Two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or gender expansive, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, plus (2SLGBTQIA+) people must be embraced and celebrated by South Asian communities. I am a Bangladeshi Muslim bisexual; therefore, part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. In my culture and community, nonconforming gender identity and non-heterosexual orientations have been deemed inappropriate and characterized as taboo. My research is grounded in my queer embodiment but speaks to the broader need for belonging of LGBTQIA+ Bangladeshi people.

In Bangladesh, discrimination and violence against sexually and gender diverse people is pervasive and ongoing; there is a lack of recognition and research that contribute to the deterioration of sexually and gender diverse youth, as commented in article "*People are having lots of other kinds of sex*": *Exploring sexual lifeworlds of LGBTQ+ young people in Bangladesh*" (Alam, 2023, pg 2). Stigma, exile, and segregation are suffered by those who are

pitted against the heteronormative society, and without sex education amongst the population, queer minorities continue to be treated inhumanely. Subsequently, negative sentiments towards queer immigrants are passed on throughout the Bangladeshi immigrant communities that have come to Canada, which can result in struggle and confusion within South Asian communities. Bangladeshi people adhere to strict heteronormative beliefs (Chaney, Sabur, and Sahoo 2020). The core audience for my thesis work is Bangladeshi people living in Calgary. Through this thesis project, I argue that 2SLGBTQIA+ people are not deviant or forbidden. The demand of my work is radical love and celebration of queerness, including my own, without objection, hysteria or questioning. Through queer storytelling, this work shares and celebrates the spectrum of gender that is possible, recognizing fluidity in identity.

The paintings that make up the thesis exhibition are derived from a short Bangladeshi dance-drama I conceived, about the significance of queer appreciation, especially in the face of prejudice and discrimination against the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. My dance-drama and subsequent paintings features two Hindu Gods, Krishna, Radha, as well as a reference to Shiva. Krishna is the incarnation of the Vedic god, Vishnu the supreme being (Bryant, 2007, pg. 3). Radha is a woman who is devoted to men and thus an idealized version of femininity (Coleman, 2018, pg.116). In the mythology she turns into a goddess as the selfless and inseparable lover of Krishna; becoming one with her lover (Coleman, 2018, pg. 116 and pg. 131). In the third painting, a human, famous poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, is represented with their legs positioned to mean the Hindu God Shiva, the destroyer (Bryant, 2007, pg. 7). Shiva is one with the third gender community (the third gender community is respected by the Hindu community)(Anjum, 2021, pg. 349). Shiva and their wife Parvati are joined bodies of optimum ecstasy both male and female (Anjum, 2021, pg. 349). Edwin F. Bryant explains that in popular South Asian culture, Krishna's relationships with the cowherd-women of Braj is the most popular motif in artistic and literary expressions (2007, pg. 15). Furthermore, the most famed motif of Krishna is when they are in the form of love and devotion to god also as a poetic expression known as Radha- Krishna (Bryant, 2007, pg. 15). Nazrul Islam composes songs about Radha-Krishna, specifically "*Sokhi She Hori Kemon Bol,*" the song of my dance drama where Nazrul is painted in the pose of Shiva (the *Nataraja*).

South Asians also reminisce about the Bengali devotee and scholar who wrote about Krishna's theology, claiming to be the incarnation of both Radha and Krishna in one body; when Radha becomes a man through the body of the monk, Chaitanta Mahaprabhu (Coleman, 2018, pg. 131- 133). In my work, the deities symbolise gender fluidity in the Hindu mythology and connote multiplicity and diversity of gender expression. The legend of Chaitanta Mahaprabhu exemplifies how the Bengali people rejoice in the narrative of Radha-Krishna, an iconic cultural signifier (Coleman, 2018, pg. 131- 133).

Through my teachings, I have come to understand Radha and Krishna are essentially spirits who are not limited to human binaries. This state allows celestial living, in which I interpret gender as inclusive and nonconformist as I play the duo, and as I play Nazrul, the human who speaks about the lovers through his revered poetry. Nazrul's poem "Sokhi She Hori Kemon Bol " is about his invigorating passion for a lover, and how he reminisces about the experience of love. This is a self-reflective work, framed by its gender fluidity because it ponders love that is relatable to anybody's desire for love - it shows a philosophical temperament towards a cerebral experience.

In contrast, I would not reference Kazi Nazrul Islam's poem if it described a specific body, gender, or aesthetic desire. He is respected for loving based on emotions and behaviours because these are more fulfilling than purely heteronormative desires. In my dance-drama, my sister, Nishith Proshanti, sings this poem underscored by ragas. For my exhibition, I have created this dance-drama in the form of three 8 foot x 4 foot paintings together entitled, "Radha is Crowned King."

In the triptych (Fig. 1), I depict myself playing Radha, the Hindu goddess of love (left panel); Krishna, the Hindu god of protection, compassion, tenderness, and love (middle panel); and the poet himself, Nazrul denoting Shiva, the destroyer and protector (right panel). By doing so I am embracing non-binarism in culturally significant ways that would be clearly read and understood by Bangladeshi Muslim or Hindu viewers. I act as each god and as Nazrul, reappropriating the allegory by switching positions of power in the relationship between Radha and Krishna. The poses and hand gestures of the figures in my paintings are symbols of this

relationship dynamic. Krishna is the devotee, Radha gains supernatural rigour, and Nazrul protects the testament of lovers.

The first panel in the series (on the left) depicts me playing Radha holding the flute and positioned in the iconic feet position that symbolizes Krishna. In the central painting I pose as Krishna as if I was reaching out tenderly into the distance for Radha; with one hand gesturing the lotus (meaning femininity) (“Lotus Flower, Hindu Sacred Flower” 2019). The last panel (on the right) is me posing as Nazrul, holding the dance position called Nataraja, which is a Bharatnatyam dance position referencing Shiva, the Hindu God. Through my paintings, I subvert cis-heteronormative love and gender expression, demanding more from life experiences and community members, by celebrating self-love as a non-binary embodiment of these deities. As well as connoting nonbinary love existing in mysterious and fluid forms of behaviors and expressions that are desirable; this is the point I believe Nazrul Islam had intended for people to understand.

In chapter one of this support paper, I expand on the thesis paintings and my thesis exhibition, describing the artistic methods, creative choices, and the process and experience of creation. In the second segment, I provide the contextualization behind my work within queer narratives of existence and resistance. In the final chapter, I put forward an argument for the importance of this work, radical love, approval, and celebration of queerness without objection, hysteria or questioning. My work is conceptually about fluidity in identity and so my paper attempts to embody this fluidity as well. My writing in this thesis support paper, fluidly mingles my perspective and knowledge alongside existing 2SLGBTQIA+ activism. There will be celebration of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community within the Bengali community to which I belong.

## **Chapter 2: Radha is Crowned King: Poetry, Dance, and Painting**

My thesis project is informed by Bengali poetry and dance as well as my lived experiences navigating my identity. Growing up, my sister and I practiced Indian Classical Music, specializing in *Nazrul Geeti*, a term defined as artists who practice musical compositions in accordance with the curriculum created by Kazi Nazrul Islam and his disciples. I enjoy this

music as it now remains a nostalgic connection to my heritage, while allowing me to navigate hybridity through tradition and practice. With this project, dance and music from the Global Southeast allow me to express my queer truth; creating art from lived experiences in both Western and Eastern cultures. My sister and I started learning Indian Classical Dance in our elementary years beginning with *Kathak*, the Indian Classical Dance form originating from Northern India, and eventually studying *Bharatnatyam*, a classical dance form from the Southern regions of the subcontinent (Vatsyayan 1974). We lived in Toronto where we were taught by the city's gurus, *Kathak* dancers Rina Singha and Biblop Kaar, and at Menaka Thakkar Dance Company as *Bharatnatyam* students.

Using my experiences as a Bharatnatyam dancer and contemporary performance artist, I conceived of a dance-drama piece in 2022 that allowed me to perform as fluid embodiments of Radha, Krishna, and Nazrul/as Shiva. By renewing ancient eastern artistic traditions, with more contemporary western styles, this performance was inspired by the fusion of old and new cultural references. My aim was to construct a research practice, forming artifacts for 2SLGBTQIA+ culture. This performance was choreographed to a version of Kazi Nazrul Islam's poem "Sokhi She Hari Kemon Bol" (translation to follow) that was sung by my sister, Nishith Proshanti (Nilambor TV 2022). The way that I have used the English alphabet to write Bengali vocabulary, is an attempt to replicate the native pronunciation as a phonetic translation. My Bengali parents, my mother who earned a Masters degree in Bengali Literature from Jagannath University in Bangladesh, translated the poetry together.

Shokhee shay hari kemon bol

*Shoke (friend), how is the existence of love?*

Nam shunay jaar atto prem jagay

*Whose name passionately rises my love.*

Choke annay atto jol

*Who brings tremendous tears of excitement.*

Shokhe shay hari kemon bol –repeated two times Musical Interlude

Shay ke acshay ai pretibitay  
*Are they here in this world?*

Gahi radha nam bashuritay  
*Whose name is so melodious like Radha.*

Gar anuragay beroho jumuna  
*Whose love and pursuit, embedded by the Yamuna River.*

Hoi uthay chochol  
*Who makes me so enthusiastic*

Musical Interval

Tari e namay blak helay ashay, kon roupe, kon goon payhelay  
*What should be my appearance, what quality do I need*

Radha shomon bholobashay  
*For them to love me like Radha loves Krishna.*

Shokhe shonayche shay naki khalo  
*I heard they are dark skin.*

Jolay kemon shey atto alo  
*Then how do they illuminate so much light.*

Maya bholieta, mayabi shay naki, koro go maya go chol  
*Romancing me with love potions, they are very clever.*

Shoki shay hari kemon bol x 2

Nam shunay jaar atto prem jagay

Chokay annay atto jol

Shoki shay hari kemon bol x 2

Nazrul writes about the experience of love as universal and identifiable due to actions, not according to gender or sexual norms. He is concerned with the philosophical struggles of feeling love and yearning for someone rather than being attached to aesthetic or cis-heteronormative desires. He conveys physical love with ambiguity; thus, I argue that Nazrul Islam is inspired to be loved so deeply, it is at the extent of the heavenly bodies. In the poem, Islam questions if this love might exist in the world. In the lyrics, Kazi Nazrul Islam mentions Radha, the Hindu goddess, describing his lover who is so profound that they have a melodious name like Radha, later noting that he wants someone to love him like Radha loves Krishna. He questions if love is real, this is to dramatize the radicalness of Nazrul's form of love. There is mystery in the fruition of a non-physical form of love, the premonition of a forthcoming love, and the relevant relatability of his desires. He symbolizes Radha's love being addictive and melodious like a flute. (Later in this section I will discuss how I reused this symbol of the flute in my art to show Radha playing it like Krishna). There is innocence in awaiting love and yet it leads to finding abundance in self-love; the real process of falling in love relies on truth and liberty, this is an important resolution I connected within this poem.

Nazrul intentionally writes in a universally welcoming manner, including interpretations and pursuits of the heart true to contemporary human nature. His poetic conversation, written from the first-person perspective, emphasizes the artist's humanity, moving from one experience to the next: an imaginary place where love exists, but we enter this dimension through the artist's body. Nazrul Islam's musical score forms the foundation of my visual art and dance. Informed by Islam's first person, humanizing perspective, my work pictures my body as a way to tell my story. His song is best for a solo performance and is thus, easily transferred into a series of self-portraits.

Importantly, Bharatnatyam dancers have danced to the music of other Bengali composers such as Kobi Guru Rabindranath Tagore. I chose to work with Nazrul Islam's poetry as his influence is integral to Indian classical culture and dance. Still today, youth ascend beyond



turbulent times in their lives through classic Indian dance which is performed to Islam or Tagore. Against the backdrop of this music, I persevere despite the pain of enduring dance practice and performance. Utilizing Kazi Nazrul Islam's writing is formulaic to Bangladeshi dance, community, and as a reclaimed tool of queer storytelling within my work. It is necessary to speak the Bengali language when communicating with Bengali people, and to me, Islam's poetry, written in Bengali, is inclusive as it acknowledges openness towards gender and sexuality. Islam's message is to bring self awareness and compassion to Bangladeshi people who are oppressed.

Kazi Nazrul Islam (1879-1976) is Bangladesh's national poet, composing from 1922 to 1942, during which time he wrote 2000 scores scribed as "Nazrul Geeti," music that the Bangladeshi people celebrate and practice (*Asia News Monitor* 2023). He is regarded as a rebel poet who criticized the British colonial government (for which he spent time in jail), writing forcefully against social evils such as, exploitation, oppression, and religious bigotry (*Asia News Monitor* 2023). "Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's message said that poet Nazrul Islam dreamt of establishing a non-communal, discrimination-free, exploitation-free and peaceful society" (*Asia News Monitor* 2023).

It is the mental temperament of Nazrul that is so admirable, and it is his abundance of compassion, empathy, and love that makes his work so remarkably relatable for me as a marginalized, politically-charged person. I embody an androgynous form of intelligence, away from the rhetoric of cis-heteronormativity, toward the realm of socially conscientious people who use poetry, and in my case art, to convey radical forms of freedom and love.

Doctor Menaka Thakkar along with the teachers at the Menaka Thakkar Dance Company, taught me Bharatnatyam. At their studios' I learned to vocalize and perform artistry about Hindu gods and goddesses as a storytelling device, mainly in dance. Through classes, rehearsals, and performances, I have been practicing this traditional dance knowledge, incorporating it into this project. From this dance curriculum, I choreographed movements as subjects for photographs that became the figurative poses in the paintings. Therefore, the poses I painted were inspired from these dance lessons and conceived of as the supernatural Radha, Krishna and poet Nazrul.

I learned about *abhinaya*, which is acting and theatrics expressed through the traditional Bharatanatyam syllabus; *abhinaya*, the term for acting, is where dancers can play gods, goddesses, and other traditional idols of South Asian culture (Vatsyayan 1974). In their 2019 article “Exploring Queer Spaces in and Through the Indian Classical Dance Bharatanatyam”, Sara Azzarello and Giuditta De Concini, discuss *Abhinaya*: “the narrative technique featured in this choreutic style- provides performers with a variegated vocabulary of bodily attitudes, hand gestures and facial expressions by means of which they can enact any character of their narrations, thus becoming “perhapsers” and moving across boundaries of several kinds-in particular, across the boundaries of gender, sexuality and desire” (Azzarello, 2019, pg.1). In the painting, I am depicted practicing two categories of Bharatnatyam; *abhinaya*, and *nritta* to indicate the specific characters of Radha, Krishna and Nazrul. In Bharatnatyam, narratives about humanity are conveyed through *abhinaya*, and longer dance compositions that are traditionally for and about celestial beings. Through this dance form, I create a determined connection to the Hindu scriptures, yet these modes of cultural expression are embedded in the psyche of South Asians like Nazrul, who are welcome to it despite religious affiliations. Azzarello and De Concini state, “the fluidity characterizing *abhinaya* makes it particularly appropriate to perform and disseminate the concept of queerness” (Azzarello, 2019, pg.129). Merging poetry, dance, and painting, I disseminate the concept of queerness and gender fluidity.

The paintings depict Bharatnatyam as a subject through the dancer’s choreography, costume, and traditional acting. Yet, the illustrative techniques used to render the painting stem from Western norms. I embrace the multifaceted traditions of the East as a type of dance that has existed for the people in Bangladesh. Bharatnatyam is the oldest of the South Asian contemporary classical dance forms in India, practiced over a period of 2000 years, tracing back to the fifth century BCE (Vatsyayan 1974, 21). The contemporary repertoires of Bharatnatyam are the results of an evolution from the eighteenth to the early nineteenth century (Vatsyayan 1974, 23). *Abhinaya*, the practice of acting or theatrical performance, is one out of two main parts in the Bharatnatyam teachings; the other is *nritta*, which are the techniques of human movement, specifically, the athletic aerobics practiced daily (Vatsyayan 1974, 24). In *abhinaya*, one can play characters and tell stories. In this practice dancers use *mudras* which are hand gestures to communicate meaning through dance. In my portrayal, Radha uses hand gestures to

symbolize playing the flute, a common trope associated with the power of Krishna. Krishna raises his hands in “alapadmo,” the symbol of a lotus in full bloom, yearning for one’s beloved, as well as, a symbol of a mirror and the full moon. The third painting of the series, shows Nazrul holding their hand in the third variation of the mudra, *katakamukaha* and the mudra *dola hasta*, symbolizing women. In abhinaya, dancers will pretend to play gods and goddesses to express human stories, it is a practice of culture and spirituality; spirituality and culture tie me to this practice despite being a queer Muslim woman.

As a Muslim, although my ancestry is entirely made of the Bangladeshi people, there could be negative perceptions of my incorporation of Hinduism because of its political and societal distinction from Islam. My predecessors have called themselves Bengali based on the Bangla language they speak, both of my parental families are from the northern province of Shylet, and their ancestral tongue is Shyleti. In Sylhet, various religions coexist, and the diversity and integration of both Islam and Hinduism is deeply embedded into the generations of native existence. These religions do not entirely define me or my family's beliefs. I am also accepted into the community of Bharatnatyam that practices Hinduism. Hinduism is practiced while performing and is learned from dancers, not the ordained; spirituality exists as a style of dance. I have ancient belongings to the lands, people, and tribes that have incubated these artistic crafts both for Muslim and Hindu people. Bangladesh is diverse; culturally, and linguistically rich, existing beyond the observable genetic or spiritual divides in the country.

I believe it is correct to state that all the diverse ancestral and generational people of Bangladesh can coexist as Bangladeshi. In his article for the book “*Global LGBTQ Activism*,” Nur E. Makbul writes that the Muslim LGBTQIA+ community are living under extreme marginalisation, being both Muslim and queer (Makbul, 2023, pg. 313 and pg. 317). Too, in the article “*Ensuring Human Rights for Gender Diverse Population in Bangladesh: the Protection Perspective*,” Humaria Anjum states that the Hindu community has diverse connections with the LGBTQIA+ community in Bangladesh; significantly their religious scriptures do not have heterosexual or homosexual distinctions (Anjum, 2021, pg. 348). Although all religions in Bangladesh discriminate the LGBTQIA+ community as sinful; the Muslim extremism is prevalent in Islamic states that forbid homosexuality, while Hindu people do not accept same sex marriage (Anjum, 2021, pp. 348-349). The biggest crisis is that the government denies the

existence of homosexuality and the LGBTQIA+ community in Bangladesh on the international forum (Anjum, 2021, pg. 351). Yet, the existence of Hindu deities of the third gender community are significant to Hindu people; the God Shiva and wife Parvati are united bodies referring to the third gender (Anjum, 2021, pg. 349). Therefore, my experience as a South Asian person involves nuanced interfaith relations.

Makbul notes the significance that art has on legislation, noting the 2SLGBTQIA+ documentary, *“A Jihad for love,”* by the filmmaker Parvez Sharma (Makbul, 2023, pg. 313). This is about the intersectional relationship between Islam and homosexuality, arguing that the Islamic faith needs to accept sexual diversity to liberate Muslim queers from prosecution in countries like Bangladesh (Makbul, 2023, pg. 313). This movie therefore indicates how the Muslim LGBTQIA+ people can protest their rights within the doctrine of the Islamic faith by sharing the experiences of living Muslim LGBTQIA+ people (Makbul, 2023, pg. 314). Furthermore, LGBTQIA+ Muslims are rejecting norms of nature and process of naturalization because it is an ideological cultural construct that leads to social inequality, binary and stereotypes (Makbul, 2023, pg. 318). This emboldens me to tell the truth of my experiences as a Muslim bisexual, and gender fluid woman, despite the marginalisation that gender and sexual binaries implicate. In my narration of my sexuality and gender, I can fluidly embody indistinct behaviours and expressions; multiplying into the variety of gender and sexual desires that create my existence. This is in hope to help bring plurality to 2SLGBTQIA+ stories of queerness, and encourage others to bring their stories to the foreground.

In *Radha is Crowned King*, I am dressed in traditional Bharatanatyam attire and positioned in very particular poses. I captured three poses that misrepresent each character - a gender swap. To portray Radha in the first pose, I placed one foot turned out, flexing in front of the other foot, a position that signifies Krishna, a god in the Hindu religion. Radha also gestures the flute with their hands, another signifier of Krishna's power and wealth. This swap of symbolism represents that Krishna bequeaths their powers to Radha, who becomes the possessor of Krishna's esteem, and she conveys this spiritual and even militaristic power. *“Radha,”* the title of the first panel is positioned in text alongside it. In the second pose on the middle panel, I reach out to the unknown and I identify this as *“Krishna,”* therefore it has a text titled *“Krishna”* beside the panel. The third pose is in the stance of *“Shiva”* with the *katakamukha* hand

gesture, which I have been taught conveys the meaning “forms of women”; this third artwork of the series is named “*Nazrul*.” In the installation this third panel is accompanied with a text reading “*Nazrul*.” The subjects visually and with words embrace gender fluidity. Radha is the female deity, Krishna the male deity, and Nazrul male human. Yet then, through playing the flute and crowning herself king, Radha becomes male. In the second panel, Krishna subdues themselves to the female and additionally Nazrul disrupts gender binaries through multiple gender expressions through his reference to Shiva. The two deities and the human poet are all nonbinary bodies because this presentation is not exclusively a female embodiment (nor male), and shows ambiguity versus stereotyping nonbinary people. The visuals of dancing, the text and mythology, are then painting genderbending and diversity.

The authors of the article “*Ensuring human rights for gender diverse population in Bangladesh: the protection perspective*” conducted quantitative research that provided this statistic: 62.50% of the surveyed, said their family will not support any change of their gender because the families believe that the genders male and/or female are not interchangeable (Anjum, 2021, pg. 264). After reading the author's research in this article, my opinion is that Bangladesh does not have an adequate understanding for gender beyond a binary. Therefore, within this discussion of my paintings, the gender swap relies on the gender binary as an access point to address the oppositional or uninformed beliefs. I believe in the expansive and fluid possibilities of gender, however here I use the gender binary to create an adaptive argument for people who may not understand the possibility of gender and the existence of non-binary people. The three figures in the paintings may be perceived by the viewer to be female, however this perception is wrong because I am non-binary. As a nonbinary representation, its stance is towards openness and fluidity; the ornate depictions ties to the Bangladeshi people and the nonbinary bodies represents social progress for gender expression.



Figure 2: Niladri, *Radha*, 2024, oil and acrylic on panel, 48 x 96 in.

*Radha is Crowned King* reads from left to right. The first painting is Radha (Fig. 2); her hands gesture the Bharatnatyam mudra *humasayam* is the hand gesture that means playing the flute. Radha is positioned in *armandi* (meaning “plea”), the feet are outward, the right foot arched up in front of the left, she confidently fixes her gaze above the audience’s eye line, on the yonder distance, an assertion of power. A slight tilt of her head, leaning their face to their right, reveals the jasmine flowers tied to their hair, braided in an extension.

Bharatnatyam dancers wear diverse arrays of six-piece garment suits (made in various versions depending on the dance) during their performances; the triptych shows all three characters uniformed and painted in a contemporary androgynous version of this suit. Radiating is the yellow gold blouse, accompanied by a magenta and solid gold lace top. They are wearing a magenta skirt tied by a beige hip band and waist belt, attached to a larger and smaller set of pleats. I chose to detail the golden beige-coloured, large and small set of pleats to have a solid orange gold trim that would keep the folds firm in real life. This frontal view showcases the pleated shape as a central anchor in the composition.

Radha, the goddess of love and lover of Krishna, is always his devotee. In this painting, she wears a more simplified costume without the adoration of jewelry. Krishna is known to be extremely popular and desirable, and Radha can become jealous of his ability to garner attention. Instead of masterminding how to hold on to him, Radha seeks his absolute admiration and wants his powers so as to switch the mechanisms that hold her oppressed. The Bangladeshi catfish is splashed across the background like a crescent moon connecting her to the rest of the sequence. Poised as a warrior, she claims her throne as the possessor of Krishna's fruits of power, embracing his vigor. Krishna has canonical symbols such as playing the flute, peacock feathers, and a poised stance, trademarks now given to Radha playing his role and fearlessly looking outward, powerful and confident. Playing the flute conveys that she holds power and symbolizes Krishna's crown.

In the middle panel, Krishna (Fig. 3), the second character played in the series, gifts his powers and revels in Radha's energy. Krishna, the god of love and protection, a conqueror, then inaugurates Radha as King. Krishna is very playful and loving, easily giving in to the whims of

his lover. He extends his hands in the Bharatnatyam mudra *alpadmo*, meaning “the moon”, a mirror, flowers, blossoming and opening. He is positioned in armandi with his right leg extended backward in *natayarvu*, an extension that is seen in the Bharatnatyam syllabus, his right hand in the mudra *dolla hasta*, which connotes a maiden. Men in Bharatnatyam can wear pantsuits; I chose a skirt to make a non-binary uniform for all characters as a consistent way to document that it is still my body playing the characters. Krishna is facing his right side as he glances away from the audience, focusing on directing his strength to Radha. I acknowledge here that the painted figure presents as stereotypically female and therefore the gender swap may be less-obvious. Given this, the title of the work plays a necessary role to inform the audience that the second pose is the male deity Krishna, who becomes nonbinary in the painting. Here too, I challenge the idea that there are stereotypical visual characteristics of what non-binary people can look like.



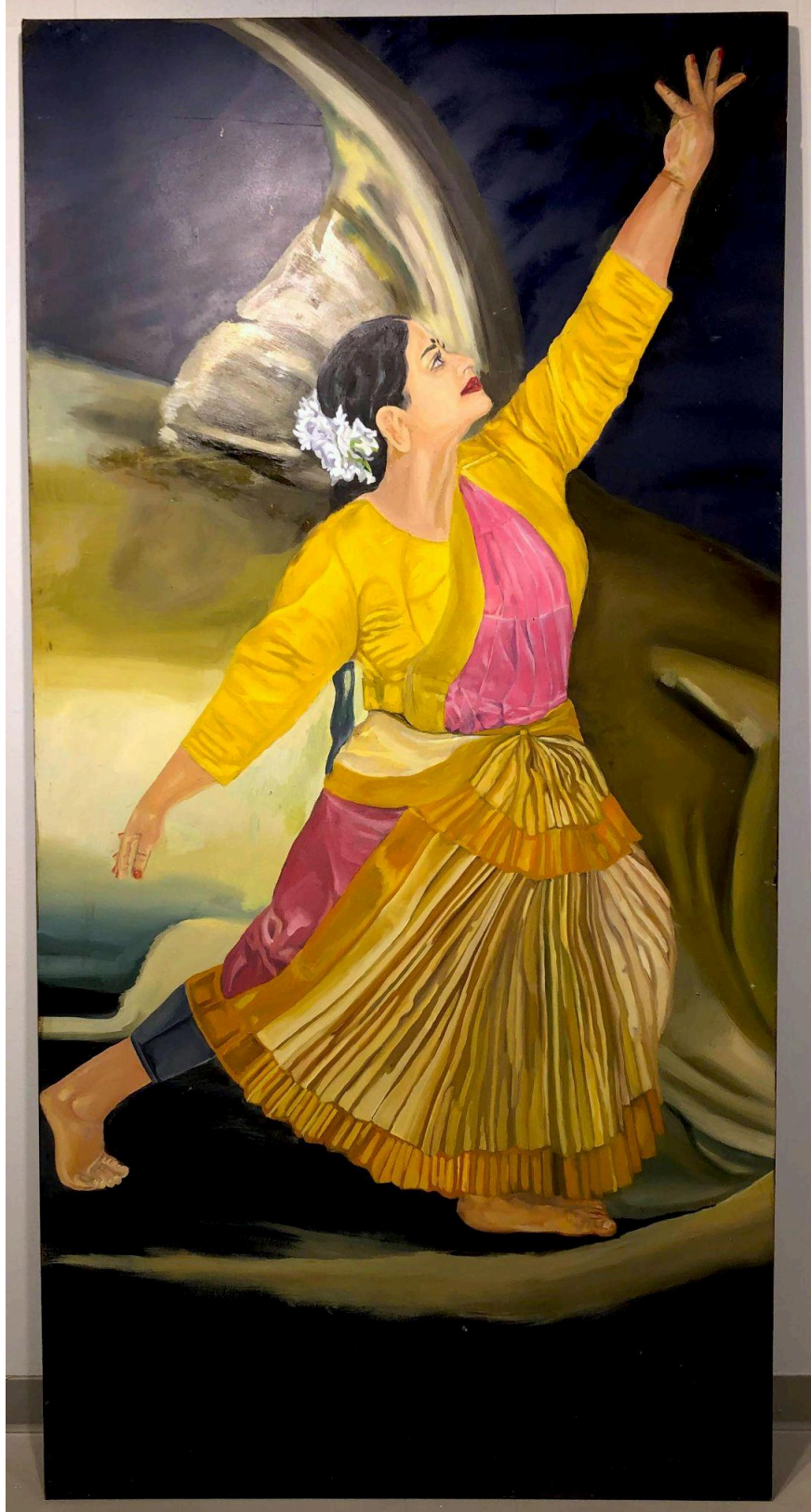


Figure 3: Niladri, *Krishna*, 2024, oil and acrylic on panel, 48" x 96".

The painting on the right is Nazrul (Fig.4), a disruption to a heteronormative picture of Radha and Krishna, not as a rival but as a vortex of passion for romance embodied through a radical stance and celebration of Nazrul's love, both for the self and the pursuit of romantic relationships. Kazi Nazrul Islam is the people's poet and radical figure for the revolutionary change necessary to end oppression. He was a feminist and disruptor of all oppressive structures. He also wrote about love and compassion for the Bangladeshi psyche; his poetry envelopes the hearts of Bangladeshi people. The three panels together nod to the third-gendered people of Bangladesh; the poet's presence disrupts gender and sexual norms, continuing the trend in this project to subvert the exclusively heteronormative interpretation of Radha and Krishna.



Figure 4: Niladri, *Nazrul*, 2024, oil and acrylic on panel, 48" x 96"

Nazrul is in the *Nataraja* position, indicating their resistance against the erosion of how beautiful, fluid, and liberated love is, to stand against oppressive forms; it is Shiva, the destroyer, annihilator, death and rebirth, another Hindu god (the *Nataraja* is a symbol for Shiva). Shiva extends like a line, one leg above, toes along the head, while holding armandi. Nazrul stands in a variation of this movement where the leg is extended at an angle, balanced like a tabletop. Nazrul holds in their right hand the mudra *katakamukaha*, meaning women and the *dola hasta* across the body, meaning maiden. The embrace of both femininity and masculinity in the three characters' imbues liberty in fluidity, healing, and a revelation for all genders and ages in the Bangladeshi community. Nazrul is the poet and writer; his lyrics regenerated into the painting invite reform as Radha, the goddess of love, is crowned King. In this acceptance of freedom to be fluid with love and gender, the three subjects' expressions are pleasant as they are experiencing uplifting confidence, heavenly ascension and vibrancy as a celebration.

The catfish that spans the background across all three panels symbolizes performance or disguised movement, embodying the flexibility of a Bharatnatyam dancer. In popular culture, “catfish” can be a reference to people hiding their actual identities behind a cover; yet, this is not the true reason to use a catfish as a symbol. The catfish, or *magur mach* in the Bengali language, is unique to Bangladesh. Fish for the Bangladeshi people are a dietary necessity and integral to the Bangladeshi ecosystem. Bangladeshi people eat fish, like the catfish in the painting, so I wanted to place this function in the backdrop of my figures, reflecting the nature of a Bangladeshi gender fluid/ nonbinary woman, and the attachment to her heritage. To create an effect of rapid movement, the fish moves in and out of the frames separately within each panel, appearing in three different ways in the backgrounds. The tail of the catfish is behind *Radha* (left panel), but the body - and belly of the catfish moves closer to the foreground in Krishna’s panel (middle). The head of the catfish peers out from the top corner of the background in *Nazrul* (right panel). The background of the painting is dark, representing mystery and ambiguity; to me, queerness. Furthermore, this field of dark colour represents the unknown depths people traverse to actualize LGBTQIA+ rights for South Asians worldwide.

The first two paintings on the left and middle, are painted in a softer, somewhat smoother, polished, way to show how they are deities rather than humans. The painting of Nazrul

\purposefully has more emphasis on its human qualities such as the eyes and the lips. The intensity of the eyes is rendered the most realistic and prominent through its powerful gaze towards the audience. The painting includes more layers of paint and what appears as unfinished parts of the body which are rendered softer to disappear and give emphasis to parts that are rendered more realistically. In the background, the fish's eye is positioned in parallel to the eyes of Nazrul. The background appears unfiltered with rougher brush strokes and blemishes to create an aura of ambiguity to emphasize dominance and imperfect human quality.

*Radha is Crowned King* spans 12 feet by 8 feet in scale. The monumentality of this triptych is purposely intended to transmit a sense of awe and grandeur. The audience becomes immersed in the painting, experiencing the other world, enveloping them. The size elevates the subject politically, giving my self-portraits as queered deities, status and presence. The difference between the viewer and the subject's scale, is intended to create the perspective where a feeling of power is transmitted to the painting's subject.

When *Radha is Crowned King* is displayed at the University of Calgary, it resists the historically oppressive confines of the institution because it presents the artist's truth in portraiture and context, the happily present Bangladeshi gender nonconforming or otherwise, disruptive woman. I have observed that cis-male figures in positions of power are represented with esteem. This attribute should be reflected when picturing minority subjects as well, which is equitable and meaningful in representation. These giant works of art embody humanity enlarged and infectious in the political spheres it targets. This work resists normative painting representations on university campuses that are typically honoring cis-hetero white males in leadership positions.

The large-scale elevation of these portraits attentively sculpts the characters through their clothing and culture. The audience is confronted with Bangladeshi people who are ambiguous and playful with gender expression. I interrupt the original identities of Radha, Krishna, and Nazrul with switches of their gender qualities. *Radha is Crowned King* was installed with two artist statements, one in the Bangla language and the other in English, creating an effect of hybridity and inclusion. The Bangla version communicates uniquely to Bengali speakers,

addressing the lyrics of Kazi Nazrul Islam and how they are narrated through the Bharatnatyam movement, and the 2SLGBTQIA+ celebration behind the messaging.

The process to paint each panel began with projecting the photographs onto the canvas to be traced into rudimentary drawings. With the three panels aligned together, further drawing into the figures and catfish determined the movement of paint that will be applied. Then, using monotone undercoats of oil paint, I created the form, shadows and highlights based on the drawing. On top of that, the detailed overcoats of vibrant color emerge into a rendered painting.

This method of art-making, from poetry and dance to a renewed painted image, is a way to interrupt the three mediums, creating new connections to artistic production for myself. The significance of the subject is placed in high regard to communicate the political, cultural, and social importance. This project is a painting that honors subject matter, the resonating character and prestige of portraiture. The grand scale gives the audience time to mesh and mend into the painting's details. It is a pleasurable experience for me when I create dynamic forms of color forming depth. My aim was to draw from my emotions and enjoy the process of brushing these dynamic colors onto the canvas, structuring them into illusions. The artistic production is an interdisciplinary hybrid, a fusion of dance and painted self-portraiture, illustrating a narrative about human identity that welcomes queerness. As subject matter, the queer body is elaborated through painting portraiture. Painting provides a challenge to follow structure and actualize a dynamic use of the combined skills required to create and embody the beauty of queerness. The process of painting is simultaneously tranquil for me. It is an elaborate but fulfilling and comforting experience that helps me resolve emotions and opinions on the human condition in an embodied way. Each painting leads to paths of self-expression, which in this case relates to queer liberation. During the intense painting process, painterly techniques are discovered and refined to create visual definition. Once again, fluidity is a part of the process of creation and painting specifically helps me gain a stronger understanding of my own identity and self-love.

### Chapter 3: Existence and Resistance through Queer Narratives

To understand the context of my work, it is imperative to understand that Bangladeshi LGBTQIA+ people have and continue to resist in Bangladesh and beyond. As colonists implemented their reign over the Indian subcontinent (during which Bengal state was included) they decided to formally eliminate those deemed undesirable with the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (Hinchy, 2019, pg. 1). The Criminal Tribes Act in 1871 persecuted people deemed inappropriate because of “cross-dressing”, begging and “unnatural” prostitution; targeting the hereditary criminals by caste and “eunuch” (Hinchy, 2019, pg. 1). The British government desired the extinction of such people (Hinchy, 2019, pg.1). The police at the time would register “eunuchs” for sodomy, kidnapping and castration, defining them as criminal and sexually deviant people (Hinchy, 2019, pg. 2). The following will continue to discuss how Bangladesh, a country that still follows Section 377 of the 1860 Indian Penal Code post independence, specifically prohibits all forms of non-reproductive sex; yet India has decriminalised homosexuality with the demolition of section 377 (Anjum, 2021, pg. 351). Bengali researcher Ibtisam Ahmed writes about the relationship between colonialism and the LGBTQIA+ community in his article, "Decolonizing Queer Neoliberalism Against LGBTQ+ Emancipation" (2019). Here, Ahmed states the problem with queerness in Bangladesh is a colonialist disillusion, beginning with Section 377, made in 1860 during the British occupation of the Indian Subcontinent (2019, pg. 1). The author Humaria Anjum references this 1860 Penal Code, Section 377 as an active agent of police brutality and convictions; the police criminalize sexual acts of other genders as “unnatural offences” in Bangladesh (Anjum, 2021, pg. 369).

Prima Alam and Cicely Marston wrote in *“Bending against straightening devices: queer lived experiences of sexuality and sexual health in Bangladesh”* that the country will continue to criminalise consensual same sex conduct (Alam, 2023, pg.2). Section 377 are laws that criminalise all sex acts outside of penile-vagina consensual penetration (Indian Penal Code, 1860, Azzarelli, 2019). Ahmed contends that colonial sentiment remains as a conveyor of modern homophobia; decolonization is the best way to legitimize and safely advance queer rights in Bangladesh (Ahmed 2019,1). Protected by religious extremism, this mandate targets the rights of liberty for the LGBTQIA+ community in Bangladesh (Anjum, 2021, pg. 372). Ibtisam

Ahmed stresses that to reclaim histories of queerness and its opposing suppression from colonization; this is why my thesis work strives to be a queer story that reclaims the existence and resilience of members of the LGBTQIA+ community from pre-colonization of the Indian subcontinent, through to today in Bangladesh and across its diaspora (2019, pg. 1).

My painting series is a celebration and legitimization of the LGBTQIA+ community; therefore, it resists the colonization of my community. I use this painting process to craft stories that reframe from the demoralization that the behaviors of Section 377 would enact against the community. When Section 377 was declared, Bangladesh was not politically recognized but existed colloquially (Ahmed 2019, pg. 1). The British Raja, empowered by the British Crown, ruled over the Bengal province, which was formed as a result of the capitalist expansion of the British East India Company (Bangla speakers have always understood themselves as a united group of people, therefore the country after independence was named Bangladesh because of the Bangla language) (Ahmed 2019, pg. 1). This law historically targeted the community, submerged the authority with gender and criminalized the colonized groups of the subcontinent. To this day, this colonial institutional power remains. The specific target of the English authority were the Aboriginal behaviors of the subcontinental population who were believed to be inferior (Ahmed 2019, pg. 1). The law did not specifically target homosexuality, rather, English authority was displeased believing in Christian, Anglo-Saxon criticism of ‘uncivilized’ and un-English behavior of the people in this region (Ahmed 2019, pg. 1). The colonial authority equated queerness to a narrative of carnal desire, and yet communities like the Hijra offer rebuttal to this generic disqualification of queer existence in the Indian Subcontinent (Ahmed 2019, pg. 2). The Hijra are people who embrace the feminine gender embodiment expressed through women’s clothing, jewellery, self care practices and physical gestures; adopting feminine names, using feminine pronouns and remaining fluid in nature; they have lineages, disciples and lead cultural practices in Bangladesh (Hinchy, 2019, pp. 20-22). Alam and Marston in *“Bending’ against straightening devices: queer lived experiences of sexuality and sexual health in Bangladesh”* explains how heteronormativity frames strict gender binaries, compulsory heterosexuality and marriage normativity into the postcolonial nations’ legal framework; as well, universally negating South Asia’s own history of sexual diversity (Alam, 2023, pg.2).



Western colonial rhetoric is the predecessor of modern white supremacy, along with all its facets that inflict inequities in the lives of queer folks around the world. I identify as an ally with all queer communities including the Hijra communities. Their stories and mine both contribute to create plural depth and knowledge that will aid in progress and equity for the queer community. I am compassionate towards these communities whose inhumane living conditions are born out of disparity, which is more reason to ignite and challenge heteronormativity for me. In my work I express gender fluidity and sexual mystery, creating space and acceptance for the Bangladeshi LGBTQIA+ people. In the article *“People are having lots of other kinds of sex”:* *Exploring sexual lifeworlds of LGBTQ+ young people in Bangladesh,*” it is reported that there are adverse health implications, such as trauma, depression and anxiety in the youth that the authors surveyed and there is a need to improve the experience of sexually and gender diverse youth who feel rejected by society (Prima, 2023, pg. 14). Research and terminology are needed to determine the rights and existence of this community; young Bangladeshi people are determined to gain their rights and freedom. My self portraits reflect this self love and appreciation for my identity that is marginalized and discriminated against, which then encourages others to embody their true selves despite the hatred that targets them. The love of dance, poetry, portraiture and merriment is meant to bring faith and renewal into the LGBTQIA+ Bangladeshi community, who are met with constant demise.

In the present socio-religious and cultural uneasiness is the problem behind Bangladeshi’s discrimination, unusually no religion there supports the LGBTQIA+ community (Anjum, 2021, pg. 370). There are numerous cases of harassment, humiliation, murder, sexual assaults and grievous offences against the LGBTQIA+ community (Anjum, 2021, pg. 343). In Bangladesh, law enforcement has proven to punish and harass men who have sex with other men and other such sexually diverse people under the beliefs of an active Section 377 in Bangladesh’s Penal Code (Anjum, 2021, pg. 344). Humaria Anjum has recommended these steps towards a dignified living for gender and sexually diverse people in Bangladesh; the state needs to give recognition, leading to legislations defining the different gender and sexual identities and access to civil liberty and human rights (Anjum, 2021, pg. 342, pg. 372). Change involves acknowledgement, tolerance, research and laws like Section 377 to be dismissed to improve the status quo of the LGBTQIA+ communities (Anjum, 2021, pg. 371).

In 1871, The Criminal Tribes Act was introduced to the state of Bengal sealing the status of tribes like Hijra, as second-class citizens, immoral, and corrupt under British governance (Ahmed, 2019, pg. 2). The British, in their imperial pursuit, weaponized gender and sexuality in customary norms to create spaces for those who belong and those who do not (Ahmed, 2019, pg. 2). I believe all genders deserve the right to freedom of gender expression. Masculinity can belong to women and non-binary people, just as femininity can exist in masculinity; I would not forbid abstract concepts such as love, sexuality and gender in such oppressive conventions as the binary rhetoric. To illustrate, British military culture saw itself as conventionally masculine compared to the effeminate Bharateya (people of India) (Ahmed 2019, pg. 2). Bangalis, at the center of British dissent, were targeted for their androgynous clothing and lack of gendered pronouns, therefore, the British regarded queerness as a sign of inferiority (Ahmed 2019, pg. 2). The British won the war because of the purity in their men against the effete and androgynous mediocrity of Indian men (Ahmed 2019, pg. 2). Presently in Bangladesh, it is conservatism that persecutes the queer community (Ahmed 2019, pg. 3).

The Hijra people of Bangladesh identify by using their own conception of a non-binary “third gender,” the majority of whom are conventionally femme-presenting but do not identify as women (Ahmed 2019, pg. 3). Their struggle against decriminalization is to attain equality, access to security, healthcare, and job opportunities (Ahmed 2019, pg. 3). In 2010, they were able to get the third gender recognized in all forms of legal and personal documentation, which aids in their mobility and access within Bangladeshi society (Ahmed 2019, pg. 3). Universally, queer and trans folk fall behind the cis-heteronormative public, social, structural, and essential mobility. The Hijra community of Bangladesh fell outside of the colonial notions of heteronormativity, causing a loss in their agency and self-determination; as well as the native identity that gets lost under the neoliberal LGBTQ rights framework (Ahmed 2019, pg. 3). Ibtisam Ahmed also discusses Rainbow Rallies, which were held in Bangladesh in 2014 and 2015, where participants marched with both international “pride” symbols like the rainbow flag while wearing traditional Bangladeshi clothing to acknowledge how queerness exists within their borders, cultures and histories of place (2019, pg. 4).

In my painting series, I acknowledge the existence of 2SLGBTQIA+ peoples within broader contexts of place, people, and culture through the incorporation of iconic traditions like Bharatnatyam and Nazrul Geeti into portrait painting. In addition, my practice creates a new hybrid narrative that is inclusive of all genders of the sexual spectrum. I state belonging to hybrid borders both 2SLGBTQIA+ and Bangladeshi. In traditions of music and dance, representation of queer people resists denial of their existence, as if to convey that I am present. Including 2SLGBTQIA+ people as the subject of the painting is a method to encourage public behavior and ideas about the 2SLGBTQIA+ community that are compassionate, respectful and inclusive. Canadians, whilst viewing the paintings, may admire the display of culture and mystery in the large scale triptych. Bigotry is symbolically overpowered by the display of love by Radha and Krishna. Instead of bigoted debates, Radha is given the position and voice over Krishna, and she includes the rebel poet Nazrul into the conversational dynamic. The three then represent ambiguity and multidimensional form of nonbinary and/or the third gender. The Canadian audience (not including the Bangladeshi people) may relate on the terms of expressing one's traditional ties to different countries that their ancestors have migrated from, as well as radically loving and having the audacity to value the true voice and nature of their bodies.

In their 2018 book, *Queering Autoethnography*, Anne M. Harris and Stacy Holman Jones discuss how certain groups of queer theorists and auto-ethnographers aim to challenge the gender binary and promote social equality (pp. 58-59). Harris and Jones iterate the introspective and experimental significance of queer and transgender literature (2018, pp. 58-59). The authors argue that art can be a powerful tool in motivating those who have yet to experience trauma to join social movements and activism (Holman Jones and Harris, 2018, pg. 62). Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that allows authors to reflect on their personal experiences and connect them to broader cultural, political, and social contexts (Holman Jones and Harris 2018, pg. 62). Within my own work, and that of several artists and writers that I draw inspiration from, I draw on personal experience to create artwork that can shape understanding and ideally, motivate change.

One of the most influential artists to me is Vivek Shraya (b.1981). She is a Canadian Screen Award winner and a Polaris Music Prize nominee, whose work acts within the borders of

music, literature, visual art, theatre, TV, film, and fashion (“About · Vivek Shraya,” n.d.). Here, I will discuss two of Shraya’s projects that have informed my thesis work the most.

*Even this Page is White* is a book of poetry about Shraya’s traumatic realities as a brown, transgender woman; criticising white supremacy as an agent of demise in her life ( Shraya, 2016). The context of the book confronts white supremacy's violent targeting of the queer community, inflicting the livelihood of women like Shraya (2016). Shraya states how hierarchies of gender, race, and sexual identities are structures of colonisation rooted in Canadian history (2016). Her work protests hate, violence, and oppression to the livelihoods of queer folk. She imagines living outside such threatening realities and stigma, with instead an abundance of love, sharing celebratory survival narratives that are necessary to healing. Shraya's work is rooted in ascribing and layering realities through her stories to tell socio-political truth. Queer stories counter the public model towards new modes of being and knowledge of place, time, development, action, and transformation (Holman Jones and Harris 2018, pg. 64). Narratives such as Shraya’s and my own are important in developing richness in understanding the depth of people, existing as truths which dissipate white supremacy.

*Radha is Crowned King* can haunt those who are rigid to gender binaries; the three different characters and space threaten the norms of cis-heteronormativity for both Westerners and Easterners. The following critique, developed by the understanding of author Tara Atluri, her explanation of Vivek Shraya’s work, and Shraya, reveals surviving against white supremacy. *Radha is Crowned King* embodies resistance. This series is both a Bangladeshi story and a Bangali diasporic story which now exists in the canon of Canadian Art. Through the inclusion of the Hindu gods which are celebrated throughout the Indian Subcontinent; the colours and textures of the clothing; the body of a brown gender non-conforming woman; and the fish that ascribes the eating customs of the Bangali people, this work resists white cis-heteronormativity. Comparisons can be made with queer storytellers, situating the work amongst South Asian diasporic literature and art including the defiant temperament arriving out of the silence in queer voices like Shraya. The style and physical form of *Radha is Crowned King* and *Even this Page is White* are different in form, yet both are expressions of South Asian Queer storytelling that

explore the dimensions of queerness. The arches of the story rely on content, wisdom, power in relationships, redistribution of power and gender that is not hindered by rudimentary binaries.

The prestige achieved through scale of this painting is not self-admiration; it is to see a Bangladeshi person perform the beautiful art from their culture and give essence to new waves of love and progress within the community. Physically, looking at the body of a Bangladeshi gender non-conforming woman so pronouncedly is accepting her brown skin and marginalised features. The paintings are in three portions of one body of work because of a direct symbolism of the third gender and the multiplicity and fluidity of gender expression. The other direct revelation is found in the genders of the characters, a man presenting person, a male deity and a female deity. The sexuality of the story or its characters remain an allusive trick. Radha takes Krishna's prestige and abilities as a tactic to exert equality, and then gaining power and freedom.

The graphic and compelling nature of Shraya's book, *Even this page is White*, provokes readers toward compassion and alertness for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. To extend intimacy on queer realities for the audience is similar to my intent in the triptych *Radha is Crowned King*. The paintings' affinity with Shraya's poetry poses very vulnerable truths, such as nonconforming gender expression. The essence of this work's contextual demand is that people can willingly and easily embody multiple genders. In my work, Radha indisputably gains the might of Krishna, and is witnessed as celestial. In Tara Atluri's essay "Even your Queer Reading is White," she talks about how *Even this Page Is White* gives nuanced ways in which racialized people experience racism, transphobia, heterosexism, and systemic injustice: verbal attacks, harassment and discrimination (2018, pg. 116). Furthermore, narratives of trauma cannot exist as refined, rational, or factual continuity; truth of trauma is in the language of irrational, cathartic expression and poetry (2018, pg. 122).

I argue that my triptych work has strong commonalities to Vivek Shraya's recent photographic installation *I give myself a future, I give myself a past*, (Fig. 5). The visual and dance medium, Bharatnatyam is present in this work by Shraya, while simultaneously celebrating queerness. This shift away from the connotations of death or erasure are dismantled to express and dream about the success of queer narratives and their creators. I believe that

Sharya's preceding works which focus more on trauma are valid and truthful parts of the queer experience and resistance. These experiences can be redefined to seek healing in the creation of reimagined works. Human depth represented in narratives happens when parts of the whole are recognized; grief, remorse, and the practice of acceptance are part of my experience as well.



Figure 5: Vivek Shraya, “Bharatnatyam Dancer” from the photographic series *I give myself a future, I give myself a past*, 2022, photograph

At the Mitchell Art Gallery in September 2022, Shraya exhibited her work *I give myself a future, I give myself a past*, noting that in the absence of homophobia, misogyny and racism, she ponders the question of “who might I be and who might I have been?” (“I Give Myself a Future, I Give Myself a Past · Vivek Shraya” 2022) Each response is captured as a photographic moment. I look at the use of mudras and feet positions from Bharatnatyam, the Indian classical dance form, in the photograph titled “Bharatnatyam Dancer” (Fig. 5). This self-portrait of Shraya is where they perform as a Bharatnatyam dancer, using hand gestures in the discipline, and vibrant trees in the outdoor background awaken thoughts of softer nature.

Queer poeticism in the work of Shraya embarks on life that is absent of homophobia portrayed in a photographic series titled, *I give myself a future, I give myself a past*.

“Bharatnatyam Dancer ” is the third photo, which shows Vivek's' hair brushed back, dressed in a dancer's six-piece garment, a standard suit worn by Radha in my art (Fig. 5). This set is colored marigold orange pleats, with burgundy and golden embroidered trims and a full sleeve blouse. She is wearing jewelry and ankle braces, unlike Radha, Krishna or Nazrul in my work. The outdoor background is a medium depth, lush collage of trees and grass where she stands in the dancer's position; one knee raised at a ninety-degree angle, left hand in the mudra *dola hasta* and the right hand in *katakamukaha*, the signs for a woman. This chignon serenity maintains a presence throughout the other works in their series, there is nostalgia and desire, emotive elements akin to the feeling of Radha's desire to embody Krishna, within the story of my paintings. The potent desire to be happy and accepted is present within artworks, a desire to be delighted with the human body as a versatile vessel. The embrace of the human body, the vibrancy of colour in paint, and the openness to queer identity and existence confirm this distance from homophobic bigotry.

Tara Asgar is a Bangladeshi Master of Fine Arts graduate from the Art Institute of Chicago, who is a practicing artist and activist (Valentina, 2023). She took refuge from Bangladeshi Islamic Extremists in the USA after the tragic murder of her friend (Valentina, 2023). After the assassination of LGBTQIA+ activists Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbani Tonoy by Islamic militant groups in 2016, Asgar had to leave her home for new borders because she is a witness of their murders (Valentina 2023). Their stories are about trans and queer survival and the unparalleled joy of the mundaneness, for example, walking near the ocean (Valentina 2023).

A concept my series connects with is the idea of multiplicity in queerness and queer narratives. Asgar expresses a need for plurality as she contends with the community to learn as a collective that "survival is never a singular journey, and that we allow each other to fail and still hold each other close" (Valentina 2023). Her work bridges the conceptual differences of directly inscribing trauma into art akin to Vivek Shraya, and enjoying the blissful success, and isolation, of modern democracy in North America. I relate to these similar comforts and express them in my Canadian and Bangladeshi self-portraits. Asgar's work surrounds ideas of the trans identity and the experience of coming out; they use mediums of public performance, text, video, and

activism to explore their realities (Valentina 2023). They feel beyond their loneliness and sadness as a trans person and survivor of trauma; that these states of the human condition are essential to the survival of queer and trans people (Valentina 2023). These traits are the route to radical self-acceptance, only truly bred from an experience of deep loneliness (Valentina 2023).



Figure 6: Tara Asgar, *A Private View*, 2022, Installation at Montalvo Arts Center, California

*A Private View* is a durational performance where Asgar plays the host of a TV cooking show (Fig. 6). Asgar is a Bangladeshi immigrant with a Western education, well versed in Bangladeshi hybridity. They command a persona by identifying traits and commonalities in modern Bengali attire. I observe similarities with Asgar's work and influencers on social media. They are pictured holding a spoon filled with solution in one hand and a jar in her left hand. Procedural cooking appliances are set on the table in a process to a dish; her hair is bleached white with teal hints of colour at the tips, and she is wearing a sari and sleeveless blouse. There is a large, framed photo with the view of a mountain landscape in the background, yet the host is outside in daylight. Although the artist uses different mediums than myself, a hybrid culture is apparent in the objects of the setting to express a unique state of Bangladeshi embodiment.

I emphasise that queer truths are rational resistance to operate against erasure under white supremacy. The diversity of emotions in the queer and trans experience provides a service of understanding the human condition and understanding folks beyond stigma or stereotypes. Therefore, the subtle calmness of human life can be sources of inspiration that are just as



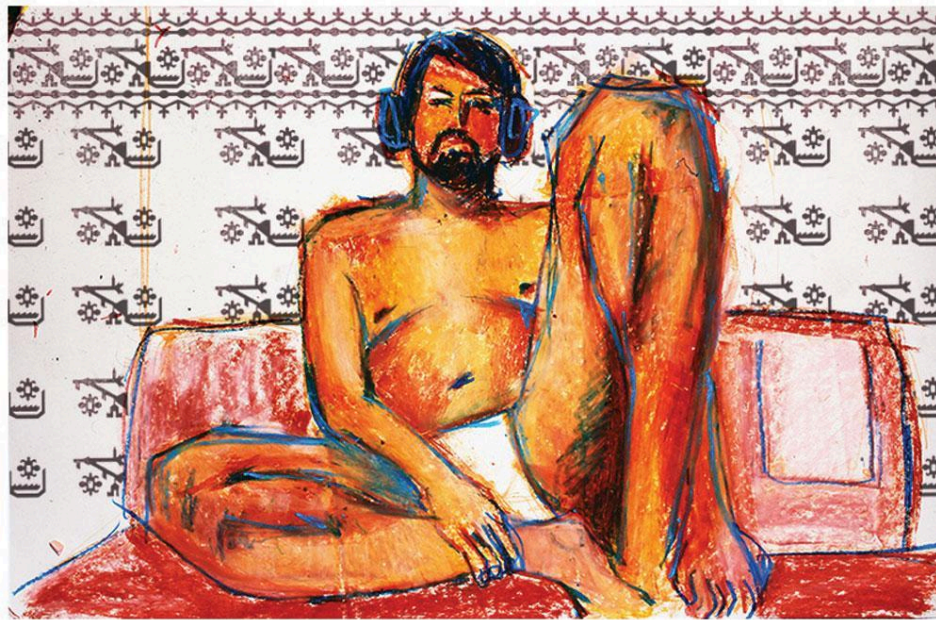
effective in advocating for human rights. Trauma and pain are embedded in that calmness as well.

Tara Asgar presently focuses on the domicile of daily life and the unexceptional experience of surviving death and trauma, like being unnoticed while walking near the ocean (an affinity among Bangladeshis because of the Bay of Bengal and the large bodies of water that dominate the land) (Valentina 2023). This commute to the ocean is the backdrop of their diary documents, in which the content depicts them exuding their sadness and loneliness through gesture and movement (Valentina 2023) In *Radha is Crowned King*, the third gender association with the Hijra community of Bangladeshi people has foregrounded my ability to express non-binary, feminine and masculine play and performance. My ability to dance with tension, pain, routine, and sacrifice has given me the mountainous strength to be able to express my fluidity.

Like Asgar, I look internally to propel radical self-love, overcoming barriers such as the violent turbulence of trans and queer deaths. I dress myself in the standard but quality garments of Bharatnatyam students, this feature gives a uniform androgyny to the portraits' physical human appearance. I took away the jewelry, instead opting to wear a simple bindi and red lipstick which are normally worn at rehearsals. The focus therefore remains on the vigor of the dancers' body, strong and athletic, ready to battle. I intended to embrace the feminine and masculine in new ways by switching the behaviours depicted, although Krishna is smaller in scale, the might of Radha and Nazrul safeguard an inner core of symbolic love within Krishna. Nazrul and Radha are equal in scale, one a female deity, another a human. They are unified by one person: the artist.

I place my work alongside artists like Vivek Shraya, work that is situated with other racialized, queer and transgender and feminist poets within the genealogy of artists of colour, challenging racist epistemology (Atluri 2018, pg. 112). Atluri explains that feminist poetry is ever growing, anti-racist knowledge and challenge, inspired by Audre Lorde who said the epistemic violence of 'white fathers' of intellect have distorted the word of poetry and imagination without social insight (Atluri 2018, pg. 115).

In my artwork *Radha is Crowned King* the brown self-portraits in the native garments are reflections of a painterly poeticism. Contextually, the root of the painting is Kazi Nuzrul Islam's song "Shoke Se Hari Kemon Bol". I use painted illustration to convey that humans can easily embody femininity, masculinity and beyond. In this work, fluidity means creating multiple images/characters that are all self-portraits simultaneously. There is a symbolic rationale to how my nonbinary presentation defends queerness. There is ease with the gender swap; three genders; the separation and unification of gender; and ease of expressing love and sexuality.



*Figure 7: Ruhul Abdin, Sitting on a Sofa, 2020, soft pastels, oil pastels, digital overlay*



Figure 8: Ruhul Abdin, *Reflections*, 2020, *soft pastels, oil pastels, digital overlay*

Ruhul Abdin creates portraits of pride figures. He is a Bangladeshi crafting queer portraiture. I especially enjoy the boldness of his pictures *Sitting on the Sofa* (Fig. 7) and *Reflections* (Fig. 8). Exclusively, my three pieces are self-portraits like the work of Tara Asgar; while materially, I use painterly and still life techniques to reproduce my resemblance in my illustrations, and in this way, my works align with Abdin's. Asgar relies on their body to transmit ideas; yet, Asgar, Abdin and I are united by the need to settle notions of norms and resistance through portraiture and thus, vibrantly colour the human figure.

Portraits create a point of looking at the human subject, and the items presented, to identify an unraveling mystery. In these works by Ruhul Abdin, male models pose in their underwear, naturally resting on a background of Bangladeshi patterns. Abdin uses boldness to

progress beyond the confines of heteronormativity in his art, while colour and contrast create a loud illustrative voice that demands gender and sexuality revolution in Bangladesh; welcoming pride.

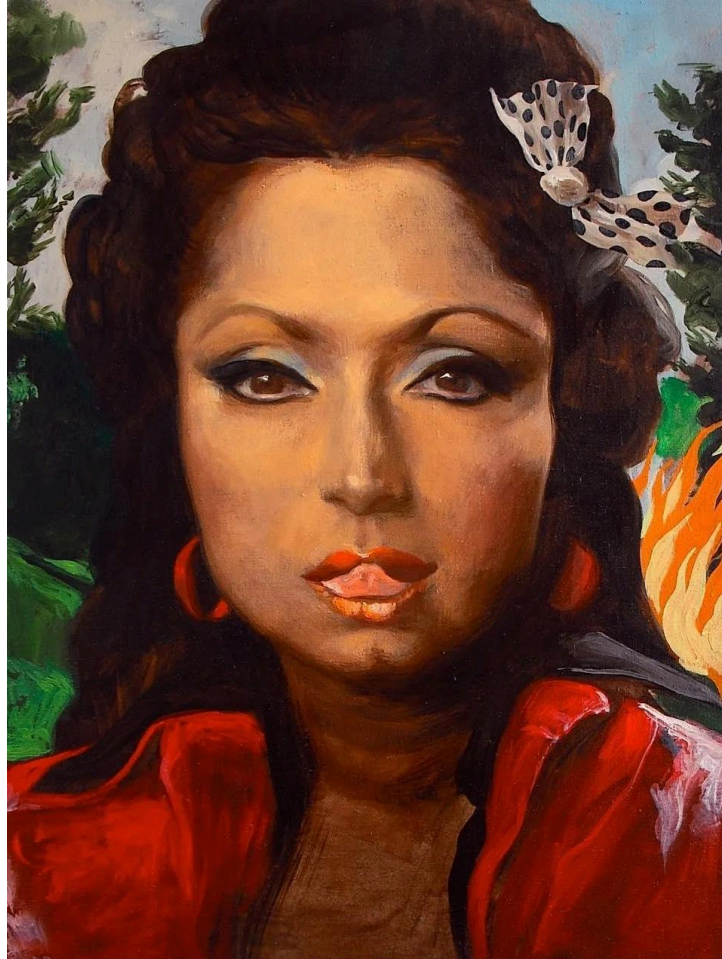


Figure 9: Salman Toor, *Pinkie*, 2012, oil on linen, 24” x 18”.

The illustrative seams between my painterly style are akin to the painterly approach of Salman Toor. The painting *Pinkie* (Fig. 9), shows a brown-skinned femme figure with dark burgundy hair and a polka-dot hair ornament, twisting her tongue up to her upper lip adorned with scarlet red lipstick. She is wearing a glaringly red blazer and hoops with flurries of green leaves enveloping the background, while flames roar above her left shoulder. The vibrancy of the portrait calls attention to the subject’s emotive expression. The painting is created using fluid brush strokes, which I perceive as radical and passionate painting.

Toor's painting style includes delicious painterly strokes akin to my own painting style. I use layers of paint to build light and shadow into form. With complimentary colours I create an undercoat, followed by a colour rich over coat, and with only a little black paint, I achieve strong vibrancy. Toor uses the richness of colour: reds and yellows and a warm, saturated brown for the skin colour. The artist also pays attention to clothing and culturally iconic materials, yet theirs is true to contemporary clothing and jewelry. In my painting, Radha and Krishna have more divine and serene expressions, whereas the femme figure *Pinkie* and the figure Nazrul in my art, have extenuated and intense facial expressions. In *Pinkie*, the gaze of the femme figure is unique and uncommon, it is redirected at the audience, confronting the viewer, much like the gaze of Nazrul but unlike the distance in the stare of Radha in my triptych (determining Radha as a deity not human like Nazrul). This act to shift away from traditions of submission by 2SLGBTQIA+ people, relates to the ideas in the work *Queering Autoethnography*, of altering creative elements to activate change. Toor and I most strongly use the gaze and facial expression to renew shifts in representation of subject matter.

I need the art activism of Shraya, Asgar, Abdin, and Toor because, as a Bangladeshi queer, I desire the hybridity offered by these South Asian artists in order to expand the limits of identity in categories. Too, as discussed by Azzarelli and De Concini, people with marginalized identities employ performance to legitimize their identities as sacred and fluid. (2019, pg. 125) The contemporary artists that I have discussed here, activate truths that border the real existence and flexibility of queer and trans experience. It is a necessity to allow my voice to grow in new parameters of non-binary or modern multifaceted ways of gender expression. As a non-binary Bengali settler to Canada, I take initiative in recognizing the impact of my migration and recognizing the influence within my community. By challenging heterosexist ideology through the celebration of myself as non-binary and through the story my paintings tell, I seek to challenge some of the settler colonial beliefs imposed here in Canada as well. With this, I hope that progress can be brought about to better society; acting in opposition to white supremacy.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

My work functions to share a narrative of 2SLGBTQIA+ acceptance. This work mediates between 2SLGBTQIA+ people to the Bangladeshi masses. This is needed to foster a stronger community that is peaceful and righteous and one to which all should be proud to adhere. The separation of the LGBTQIA+ people from mainstream Bangladesh is condemnable and morally unacceptable, because it is discrimination, restricting mobility and rights to this minority group. My painting's message of celebrating the LGBTQIA+ Bangladeshi people by illustrating the power of queer people, is a message of inclusivity for the Bengalis.

This work uses traditional Bangladeshi dance, music, and depicted gestures as grounds for a Bangladeshi audience's connection. This work is queer intervention and storytelling which allows for subversive breaks in cis-heteronormativity and strict gender binaries. The ambiguity of the figure in the paintings represents a flexibility of gender expression and sexuality. I understand that identity exists beyond gender and sex binaries.

*Radha is Crowned King* makes space for understanding of sexualities, gender identities, and fluidity while honoring our beautiful existence through the creation and presentation of the triptych of oil paintings. The aim of creating this project is to command compassion for Bangladeshi people and to acknowledge the experiences of love beyond the restrictions of cisgendered, hetero-patriarchal normativity. Through this work, I present a fluid and mysterious depiction of love and gender, played by one body, yet embodying multiplicity.

Using my experiences as a Bharatnatyam dancer and contemporary performance artist, in 2022 I conceived of a dance-drama piece that allowed me to perform as fluid embodiments of Radha, Krishna, and Nazrul. This work renews traditional narratives by incorporating contemporary perspectives, melding traditions from the East and the West, to create plausible and generative productions that form artifacts for the 2SLGBTQIA+ collective and culture. This work contributes to fostering a stronger community that is peaceful and accepting. The greater significance is that 2SLGBTQIA+ people are part of Canadian society and contribute to life here, therefore, Bangladeshi people who are also part of the fabric of Canada can be more compassionate. All people who have made Canada home could learn about heartfelt and meaningful acceptance towards each other through my work.

Building on my thesis work, in the future, I plan to produce more large-scale paintings where the theme is centered on celebration of marginalized existence. An example of a future project I have is to express the freedom in identity afforded to me by living in Canada, by painting myself in non-traditional gowns created by queer designers. It is important for adults to exemplify self-love as queer people because queer rights for youth are becoming inaccessible here. If we tolerate bigotry and any form of discrimination, then the environment becomes even more dangerous for queer youth. Paintings that celebrate marginalized existence can help generate understanding and acceptance that fights homophobia and intolerance.

As noted in the paper, there are many artists who are creating work that tell queer stories. Each of those artists have inspired my work in different ways and helped me to shape my own unique creative practice. The queer South Asian artists referenced in my paper, become layers within the work, where I incorporate teachings from each artist. From Shraya, I have learned fluidity does exist for women; and that activism can be shown in loving ways without reproducing violence against the self or others. Asgar and Shraya employ strategies of creating settings with objects, displays, backgrounds, makeup, hairstyles, clothing, and decoration to create a narrative expressed through visual choreography. Abdin allows a subdued, vulnerable, honest and humanitarian mentality of manliness. Asgar and Abdin are direct contributors to the desire of the queer Bangladeshi community to open-up about the truth of their nature.

Within my work, I build layers. These layers include gender swaps; poetry; dance; western painting; Southeast Asian icons/deities; bodily gestures and gazes; and cultural symbols; which interact with one another fluidly within my work. My work contributes my truth and story of fluidity within this queer space. The significance of this work is to rejoice with and for 2SLGBTQIA+ people and honor our existence and beauty.

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