

## IDENTITY IN CONFLICT: IMAGE AND REALITY OF BANGLADESHIS IN MALAYSIA

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### ABSTRACT

Bangladeshis have often been associated with a nation that suffers from extreme poverty, embroiled in political turmoil, afflicted by floods, cyclones and by tragic accidents; these are the images that the mass media often portrays of Bangladesh internationally. Besides these associations, the media in Malaysia also focuses on the migrant workers and some of their isolated cases of criminal and antisocial activities. These activities portray a rather bleak and unwholesome picture of Bangladeshis in Malaysia and go towards creating an identity which is in conflict with the real identity of most Bangladesh nationals residing in this multicultural nation; hence, people in general develop a negative image of most Bangladeshis. This paper humbly attempts to show from a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective how the one sided media portrayal may contribute to the construction of an identity which not only contradicts but is also in conflict with the real identity of most Bangladeshi nationals—be they students, academics, professionals, businessmen or workers—residing in Malaysia. It is hoped that awareness of the issue from a CDA stance will help to dispel the stereotypical associations that more often than not may be triggered by portrayal of certain reports in the media.

**Key Words:** identity, conflict, Bangladeshi, Malaysian.

### I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary age, which is overwhelmed by the advance of technology, discourse plays a very important role in disseminating knowledge and information. From a social perspective, Fairclough says “the emerge of a ‘knowledge-based’ economy is also ‘discoursed-based’ in the sense that new knowledges are produced, circulated and applied in production as new discourse”<sup>1</sup>. Those who control the discourse of a society have the power to control, sustain or reshape the ideology of that society. In doing so, they manufacture consent, thereby legitimizing their agendas, which thence become part of the social setup or structure. One of the most powerful modes of discourse is media discourse; it is through such a discourse, the ideologies of the more powerful entities may be propagated in order to server the hidden agendas of the so-called *saviours of the world*. The influence of the media is so powerful that it can sway the minds of many as it is often the only window through which news and information is communicated and disseminated to a

majority of the people of various regions. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq bare testimony to the influence and power of the media in channelling and controlling the information that is needed to justify, legitimize and to some extent convince people into believing certain ideologies of those who control the discourse of media.

However, though concerned with media discourse, the focus of this paper does not concern itself with issues of such grand scale; it deals with a more subtle issue of conflicting identities of Bangladeshi nationals residing in Malaysia, which needs to be surfaced in order to dispel the bleak images that seem to be associated with Bangladeshis in this multicultural nation. The issue of conflicting identities is not apparent to most people in Malaysia because the media do not project both the identities—only the negative or pessimistic one is reported; hence, there is no basis for comparison. Looking at the issue from a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective will help not only to surface the issue but also aid in balancing the one-

sided asymmetrical coverage as portrayed by the media.

## II. PURPOSE / OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER

The purpose of this paper is two folds—to acquaint the readers with the various categories of Bangladeshi nationals residing in Malaysia and to show how the image projected by the media leads to the shaping of an identity that seems to contradict the apparent identity of most Bangladeshis.

It is not the purpose of this paper to point the finger at anyone or even to insinuate the idea that the identity portrayed by the media is done so with the intention of belittling or degrading the dignity of Bangladeshis. The overall objective of the paper is to focus on the polarizing issue of conflict that exists between a pessimistic view of Bangladeshis that is projected by the media and the optimistic view that is rarely projected. In doing so, it will shed some light on the predicament of many nationals of Bangladesh whose real identity is sometimes overshadowed by the one that is reflected in the media. Awareness of such an issue will presumably make people see Bangladeshis in a more positive light and not merely confine them to the stereotypical associations that more often than not may be triggered by portrayal of certain media reports.

### A. Theoretical Background / Assumptions

One of the prime objectives of CDA is to unearth, bring to the surface or make apparent the not so apparent issues that may exist in a society. By making apparent the issues that are not so apparent, CDA tries to empower the general public with the knowledge of knowing what they originally did not know. Once a community or a society becomes aware of the issues that may have escaped their common senses, they will be in an empowered position to choose what to believe and what not to believe, what is authentic and what is doubtful or questionable. In other words, they will be more discerning, critical and conscious about the social practices of the society and not take everything for granted or at face value.

The approach that has been adopted to analyse media discourse for this paper resembles a modified form of Fairclough's three-dimensional approach to CDA, which consists of three levels: *linguistic and*

*semiotic description* (text analysis), *interpretation* (processing analysis), and *explanation* (social analysis from an ideological perspective). It should be kept in mind that because "a piece of discourse is embedded within sociocultural practice at a number of levels; in the immediate situation, in the wider institution or organization, and at a societal level", the whole process of analysis usually occurs simultaneously<sup>2</sup>.

Another central approach that has been adopted in order to comprehend the clash between the projected and un-projected identity of Bangladeshis in Malaysia is van Dijk's multidisciplinary approach to analyse and explain ideology in terms of the "'triangle' of (social) *cognition, society and discourse*"<sup>3</sup>.

The small-scale study adopts a non-experimental, descriptive paradigm to try to explain the tension between the two opposing types of identities that are in existence regarding the Bangladeshis in Malaysia. In order to fulfil the two-pronged objective of enlightening the reader, with regard to the categories of Bangladeshis living in Malaysia and how a one sided portrayal by the media contributes in an identity that contradicts the real identity of Bangladeshis, the methodology adopted basically consists of the following elements:

- i) Observation, personal experience, comparison and selection of data;
- ii) Meetings and interviews with the various categories of Bangladeshis in Malaysia;
- iii) Interviews with some employers;
- iv) Interviews with representatives of Tenaganita (Malaysian human rights organization);
- v) CDA of media reports from the various newspapers in Malaysia.

### B. Bangladesh Nationals in Malaysia

In the early 1990s, Bangladeshi migrant workers started coming to Malaysia, as it was around that time when Malaysia was in need of a great number of work forces to carry out its construction work as well as its industrialization activities. The crises in the Persian Gulf during the period of 1990-91 influenced the shift from that region to South-East and East Asia<sup>4</sup>. Since Malaysia was in dire shortage of labour workers, "more so than other countries in the region (ILO, 1998)" they entered into agreement in 1992 with Bangladesh "for the systematic transfer of labour on a large scale"<sup>5</sup>. During that period Bangladeshi workers constituted

the second largest work force in Malaysia, the first being Indonesia. The exact number of Bangladeshi workers at that time is not known but in 1994, there were about 100,000 legal, and probably another 400,000 illegal workers in the country<sup>6</sup>. Workers who were engaged as construction labours were mostly unskilled in their profession while those who were engaged in the garments factories were skilled and highly sought after<sup>7</sup>.

Usually the Bangladeshis go to great lengths to finance their migration to Malaysia—the most common form of action is by borrowing money (see

Table 1). The reasons for migrating are various—the push factors include poor wages in Bangladesh (49.6 %), limited employment opportunities at home (27.7 %), monotony (7.1 %) and parental encouragement (7.1 %); the pull factors comprise of abundant opportunities (83.7 %) in Malaysia, higher wages, compared to Bangladeshi standards, (10.6 %), appealing job offers (9.9 %). The workers endeavour very hard to conserve their money, as they generally have great responsibilities to shoulder. Table 2 lists some of the reasons why Bangladeshi migrant workers try to save as much of their earnings as possible (Abdul Aziz, 2001).

TABLE 1  
SOURCES OF FUNDS TO FINANCE MIGRATION TO MALAYSIA

Sl.	MEANS / SOURCES OF FUNDS	PERCENTAGE
1.	Borrowed money	48.2
2.	Used won savings	27.7
3.	Sold land	22.0
4.	Pawned jewellery	9.2
5.	Sold livestock	8.5
6.	Used parents' savings	7.1
7.	Used siblings' savings	1.4

Source: Adapted from Abdul-Aziz, 2001

TABLE 2  
REASONS OF BANGLADESH MIGRANT WORKERS FOR  
CONSERVING THEIR EARNINGS

Sl.	REASONS	PERCENTAGE
1.	Future use	45.9
2.	Business start-up	28.6
3.	Land purchase	7.1
4.	Marriage	4.1
5.	House purchase	5.1
6.	Family	5.1
7.	Return fare	3.1
8.	Settle debt	1.0

Source: Adapted from Abdul-Aziz, 2001

It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of legal Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia at present; it may be safe to say somewhere around 113,000<sup>8</sup>. In the future, more workers are expected to be engaged by Malaysia, about 50,000; the Bangladeshi and the host government have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU)<sup>9</sup>.

Apart from the migrant workers, which constitute majority of the Bangladeshis, there are other categories of Bangladeshi nationals living in Malaysia. They comprise of professionals (engineers, doctors), businesspersons, academics and educationalists, students (undergraduates and postgraduates) and researchers. Besides other factors, some of the primary reasons why these categories of people are attracted to this country are because Malaysia is a multicultural and multiethnic, which implies that it has certain levels of tolerance for people of various backgrounds; it has a Muslim majority population and yet the free practice of various religion is not throttled; many cultural practices of this nation are similar to that of Bangladesh; the cost of living in comparison to the money earned is relatively moderate; relative stability in law and order; increase of growing status in the international community; picturesque and beautiful landscapes with great holiday destinations.

For students the attractions are the local and private institutions of higher learning, which not only offer quality education but also have international links; the foreign university campuses are also enticing. The communicative infrastructure of the country and the potential and prospects of becoming one of the booming IT hubs of the region are quite inviting to students to pursue their studies at a comparatively moderate international rate. In future, more students may be coming to Malaysia; this country is beginning to understand its potential for becoming one of the top education markets in Asia and is venturing into other countries to promote its education industry. Last July the Exhibition, Promotion and Management (EXPAM) authorities of Malaysia organized a two-day educational fair in the capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka, in which eight private universities and colleges participated. At the fair Marliza Zorakin Malek, senior manager of the EXPAM, appraised the audience and mentioned that there are about 600 Bangladeshi students studying in Malaysia (at the tertiary level). She further informed that the interest of more students in pursuing studies in Malaysia was growing<sup>10</sup>.

### C. Media Discourse: Discourse, Power and Ideology

Fairclough in his groundbreaking book *Language and Power* mentions that one of the most obvious differences between face-to-face discourse and media discourse is the 'one-sidedness' of the later<sup>11</sup>. In face-to-face interaction, the participants get the opportunity of being the producer and interpreter of the text, whereas in media discourse, one only gets to be the producer or the interpreter; the interpreter usually is dependent on the producer and the power relationship is asymmetrical. In other words, the producers of media texts have the influence and / or power to control the discourse and thereby the ultimate way the message / text will be interpreted. In media discourse, the language used to construct or produce the text is very important. The visuals, when used, also play a significant role in creating the desired effect or impact in channelling the interpretation in a certain direction.

Another important distinction that Fairclough makes is the fact that in face-to-face discourse the participants have the flexibility of adapting to the language (and situation) based on the 'feedback' they get from co-participants<sup>12</sup>. In media discourse the producer of the text and the interpreter of the text are separated by time and space / place, hence, they do not have the opportunity of getting the instant feedback as is possible in face-to-face interaction in real-time; which means, the producers cannot always adapt according to the needs of the interpreters or audience. In such a situation, the producer produces the text with *some* interpretation in mind, by trying to address an *ideal* subject or audience, be it / they viewer(s), or listener(s), or reader(s)<sup>13</sup>. When this happens, the text is very rarely context or ideology free, as the interpretation of that text will be tinted with the ideology, at least to some extent, of the producer; media discourse is seldom, if at all, absolutely disinterested, unbiased or neutral.

The contemporary world is so very dependent on media, and the discourse media uses is very influential and powerful in shaping, reshaping or even sustaining certain ideologies of certain dominant forces in a society<sup>14</sup>. In general, those who control the discourse of the media are usually positioned or have the ability to position themselves at or towards the apex of the social hierarchy or the great chain of being of the social structure or setup.

**D. Projected vs. Un-projected Image: Identity in Conflict**

Most of the reports that are printed in the Malaysian newspapers or are broadcasted over the television give a pessimistic view of Bangladesh and / or Bangladeshis. The occurrences that take place in Bangladesh that are reported here are usually related to disaster, political turmoil at the state / national level, violence on the university campus, natural calamities like flood or cyclones; at the international level reports related to corruption, pollution, overpopulation are not uncommon; locally most of the reports involve the activities of migrant workers (sometimes illegal).

These types of reports go towards projecting a bleak image of Bangladeshis in general. With the media reporting on such events and occurrences, an

identity takes shape, in the due course of time. This so-called identity becomes associated with, or to some extent imposed upon the Bangladeshi nationals living in Malaysia. However, this identity is not the only identity of most of the Bangladeshis dwelling in this multicultural country; the identity that is most representative, which is very much optimistic in nature, is not projected or highlighted by the media. The representative identity implies that the 'legal' Bangladeshis residing in this nation are hard working, dedicated, goal-oriented and hopeful in their outlook. The two opposing views, one projected by the media and the other un-projected, seem to clash; this gives rise to an identity that is in conflict (Figure 1). This conflict appears to be apparent to most of the Bangladeshis and not to the locals, because they are not aware of the positive criteria, as the media do not highlight those characteristics.

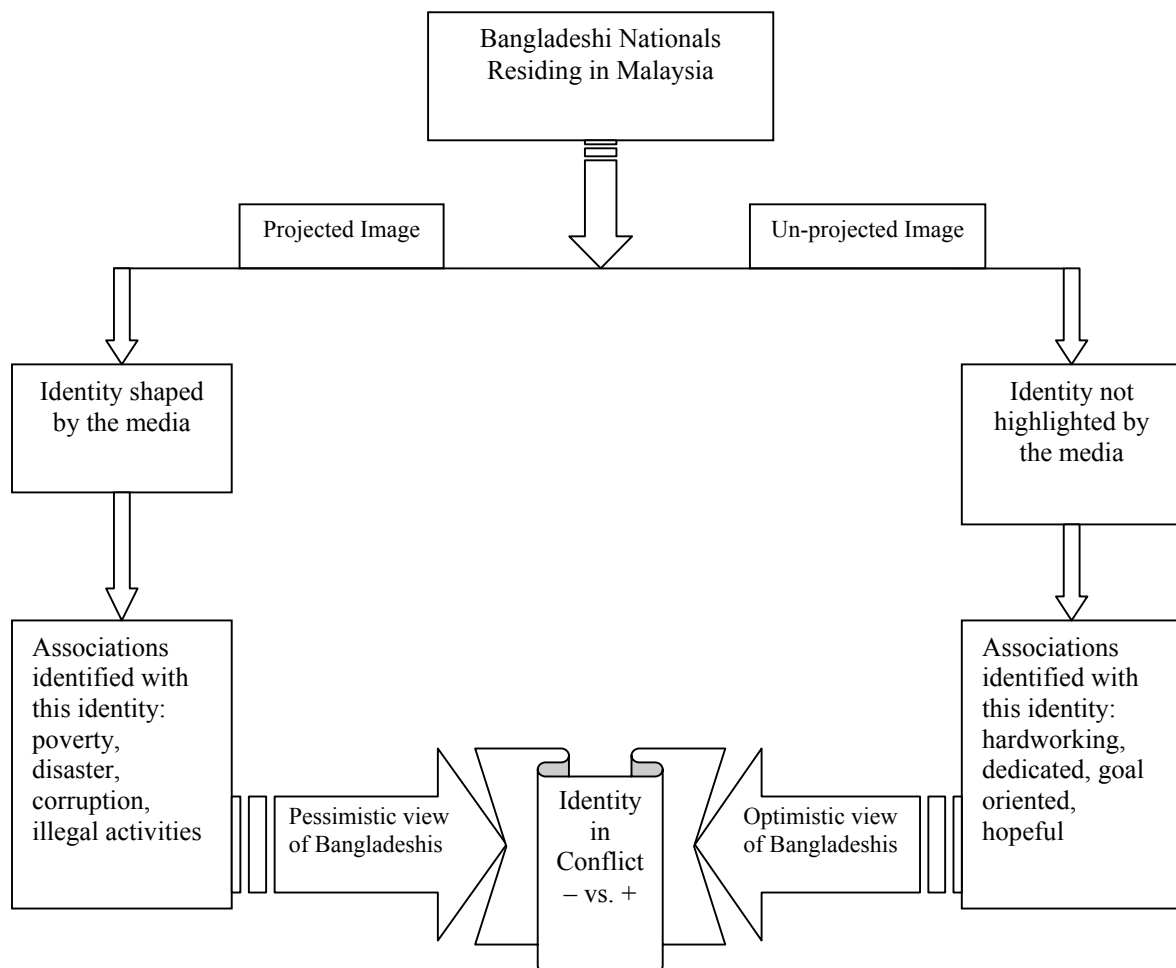


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of 'identity in conflict'.

**E. Apparent Reality: One Sidedness of Media Reports**

The producers of media reports, when writing reports, in general have an *ideal* audience in mind—the Malaysian majority. The Malaysian majority interpret the reports in the way they were intended to be interpreted by the producers of the media texts. Besides the *ideal* audience (Malaysian majority), there is also a *non-ideal* (as opposed to *ideal*) audience comprising of the Bangladeshi minority. This audience do not interpret the reports in the manner that the producers intended them to be interpreted, because the *non-ideal* interpreters are aware of the fact that the negative activities that are usually reported by the media do not represent

their real identity, which is not reported by the media and therefore un-projected (Figure 2).

The producers of media texts usually structure their reports in such a way that they appear to give the impression of associating all Bangladeshis in Malaysia in negative light. The headlines of a typical media text comprises of the word “Bangladeshi or Bangla” and the negative activity that has been carried out (Table 3). The word ‘Bangladeshi / Bangla’ implies all categories of Bangladeshis in Malaysia, which include migrant workers, professionals (engineers, doctors), businesspersons, academics, educationalist, students, researchers, dependents of the above (except migrant workers).

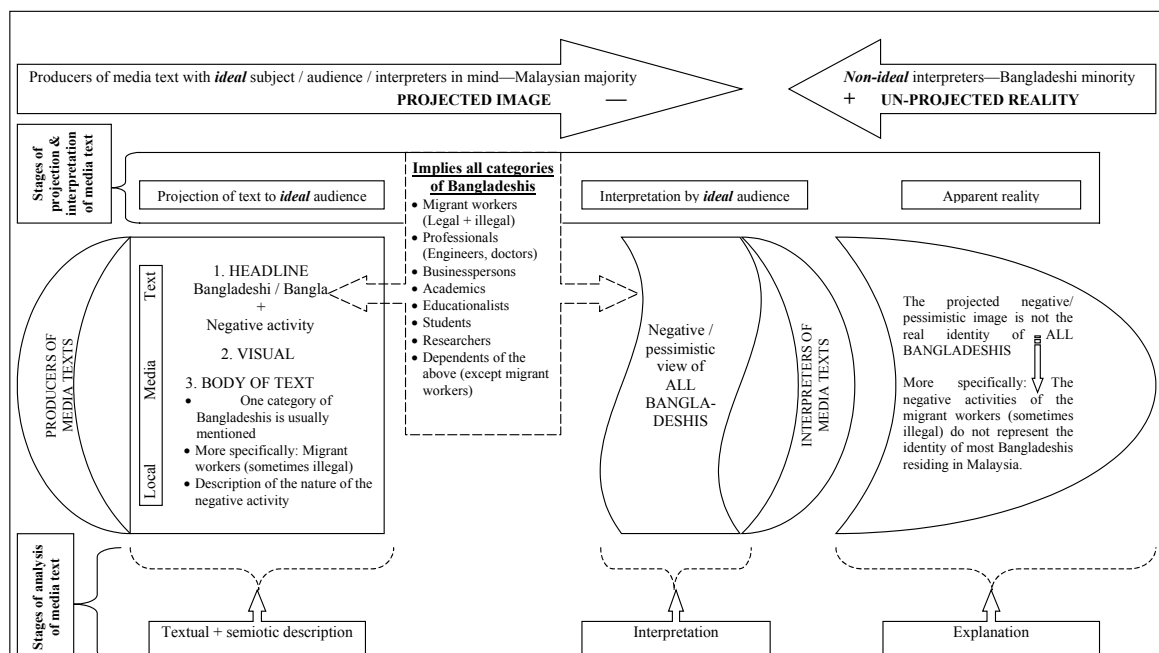


Figure 2: Diagrammatic representation of the ‘projected image and un-projected reality’ in relation to the ‘projection and interpretation’ and the ‘stages of analysis’ of media text

Table 3: Some selected headlines from local newspaper reports / articles where Bangladeshis / Bangla (implying all Bangladeshis rather than one specific category) is highlighted along with the negative activity

Sl.	Newspaper	Date	Headline of newspaper report / article	Key words connoting negative associations
1.	The Star	27.12.2003	Bangladeshi held after airline lodges terror report	Bangladeshi held—terror
2.	The Star	25.09.2003	Bangladeshi charged with giving bribe to cop	Bangladeshi charged—bribe cop
3.	New Straits Times	25.09.2003	Bangladeshi charged with corruption	Bangladeshi charged—corruption
4.	Metro	25.09.2003	Bangla dituduh rasuah polis	Bangla dituduh (charged)—rasuah (bribe)
5.	New Straits Times	22.08.2003	Missing Passports: Bangladeshi sought	Missing Passports—Bangladeshi sought
6.	New Straits Times	23.07.2003	Bangladeshi found mentally fit to stand trial for murder	Bangladeshi—trial—murder
7.	The Star	20.05.2003	Bangla kidnap gang busted	Bangla—kidnap gang
8.	New Straits Times	17.05.2003	Bangladeshi sought over murder	Bangladeshi sought—murder
9.	The Malay Mail	04.12.2002	11 Bangla workers demand payment	Bangla workers—demand payment*
10.	The Star	16.10.2002	Bangladeshi gets 10 months	Bangladeshi—gets 10 months
11.	The Sun	01.02.2002	Bangladeshi charged with robbing and confining countryman	Bangladeshi—charged with robbing

\* Even when Bangladeshis are the victims, as they were forced to resign without pay, the headline is written in such a manner as to make the victims (Bangladeshis) seem quarrelsome by using the assertive “demand”.

Source: Local newspapers of Malaysia

So, the headline of a typical text associates all categories of Bangladeshis in Malaysia with the negative activity of the report (Figure 2), which paints, as already mentioned, a bleak picture of Bangladeshi nationals living in this country. The headline is intensified even more when a visual in the form of a picture of the accused sometimes accompanies the text / report. In the body of the text the specific category of Bangladeshi national, generally migrant workers (sometimes illegal), is classified and the details of the nature of the negative activity described. Many readers may not even read the body of the text and become aware that only one category of the Bangladeshis and not all should be associated with the negative activity mentioned in the heading. However, just by focusing on the headline and the visual, a reader may associate all Bangladeshis with the mentioned or reported negative activity and generalize the fact that Bangladeshis are responsible for the negative activities or are a contributing factor in the rise of crime or criminal activities in the country. It may be

that this is the notion that the producers of the media text want to convey to the *ideal* audience, which is what they interpret. The fact that this is not the whole story needs to be explained. However, since, media does not focus upon the positive aspects of the various categories of Bangladeshis residing in this multicultural nation only one side of the coin is seen or story is told; the apparent reality, unconsciously or consciously (depending on how one looks at it), gets suppressed (Figure 2).

#### F. Attributes of Bangladeshis in Malaysia

The Bangladeshis, however small, have contributed in some ways or other to the development of this country. In the early 1990s when Malaysia was in need of a resilient workforce to carry out its constructions and development activities it entered into an agreement with Bangladesh in 1992 for the systematic transfer of labour on a large scale and in 1994 into another agreement for the annual importation of 50,000 workers<sup>15</sup>. Due to the rapid

development of Malaysia in the 1980s, the number of foreign workers from approximately half a million in 1984 increased to 1.2 million in 1991 and a staggering 2.4 million in early 1998<sup>16</sup>. Abdul-Aziz says that whether the workers worked as part of the regularized or clandestine foreign workforce, workers from Bangladesh represented the second largest group, i.e. one fifth of the foreign site operatives in Malaysia, second only to Indonesians<sup>17</sup>. Despite the demanding work condition or the work treatment they were subjected to, the Bangladeshi migrant workers toiled on and remained optimistic. Sometimes, the workers after working for a number of years (for example six years) are forced to resign without having their remuneration settled<sup>18</sup>. Media does not usually focus on such topics or subjects.

In the academia, various academics have made various contributions which are not highlighted. For instance, two Bangladeshi academics working at the International Islamic University, Malaysia (IIUM) have received the 'researcher of the year' award for their contributions towards research and publication. One of the two was also appointed as one of the '2000 Outstanding Scientists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Achiever of Excellence' and instated in the archives of the 'International Biographical Centre, Cambridge, England'.<sup>19</sup> At Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) a Bangladeshi Professor published numerous books and articles on Malaysian and Singaporean literature. In the papers sometimes, his publications are publicised but not the man himself (yet being a foreigner, more specifically a Bangladeshi, he is the only professor in his department)<sup>20</sup>.

Bangladeshi students who come to Malaysia to pursue higher studies are quite focused and motivated and choose the institutions, state / national or private, according to their field of interests or other facilities provided by the institutes, like international links or twinning programmes. Those who enrol at the undergraduate level usually go on to complete their graduate level degrees and some their doctoral degrees, by research or by a combination of coursework and research; some specifically come to Malaysia to do research.

In general, though the Bangladeshis came to Malaysia due to various reasons and under various circumstances, some to work, some to do business, some to pursue higher studies, they have been part

of this multicultural and multiethnic nation for over a decade or so. They have shops and businesses in this country, they can be frequently seen on the streets, they even appear in the literature of Malaysia; Dina Zaman (1997) in one of the short stories entitled "The Passenger" from her book *Night & Day* writes<sup>21</sup>:

*She waited.*

*She got tired of looking at Kota Raya and counting the Indonesians and Bangladeshis.*

*She turned around ...*

Due to their contributions, some have even gained the status of permanent residence while some have married locals and steeled down. However, as already mentioned, the media do not usually focus upon the positive attributes of Bangladeshis in Malaysia.

### III. CONCLUSION

Poverty, overpopulation, natural calamity, pollution and corruption are just few of the images that many have of Bangladesh. These images are reinforced not only by the mass media but also by those who chose to depict the country in term of its internal state of disorder and chaos. It is undeniable that these aspects are features of a nation that is still trying to etch a more formidable image of itself to portray to the rest of the world. However, despite the poor economic situation of most Bangladeshis, they are dedicated, hardworking and optimistic in their struggle for survival in a world where very little opportunities exist for them. Those who have had the chance to explore the home of the royal Bengal tiger, the city of mosques, the land of rivers, taste the spices and delicacies of an age old tradition, danced in the rapture of the cultural festivities and experienced the tranquillity of the green and yellow dewy fields of the winter morns will paint a picture that is truly reminiscent of the Bengali psyche. However, media does not always focus on such enlightening multi-ferrous facets of the country.

It may be a common norm for many natives of Malaysia, which is socially, economically and politically more stable than Bangladesh, to consider themselves as privileged and somewhat lucky. Yet there are those foreigners like Bangladeshis who work and live in this country for the mere sake of survival or because they have been able to etch out careers which are more enduring and lucrative in terms of the local and global situation. There are



also those who study here because they find that higher education in this country is worthwhile in terms of quality and affordability. Whatever the reasons may be for Bangladeshis of choosing this country as their destination, they are motivated, determined and hopeful about their future and prospects in a host country such as Malaysia. They have a positive identity of their own, which reflects their optimism despite all odds. However, their positive image is being submerged by the one sided portrayal of the projected image that is usually reported by the media. The pessimism that is overshadowing the optimism of the Bangladeshis in Malaysia needs to be counterbalanced by more specific media reports that identify the category of culprits in the headline rather than talk about them in general which portrays all Bangladeshis in a negative light. Coupled with this, the positive unprojected criteria of the Bangladeshis also need to be highlighted at times by the media in order to create a more congenial atmosphere for the optimism to prevail.

By looking at the issue of 'identity in conflict' of Bangladeshis living in Malaysia and discussing the matter in an open manner, it is hoped the some kind of awareness will be created regarding the issue at hand. It is through such awareness that the resolution of conflicting identities may be confronted in a more comprehending and empathetic atmosphere; this in the long run may facilitate in resolving to dispel the pessimistic views that are stereotypically associated with the various categories of Bangladeshi nationals residing in Malaysia.

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