Queering postsecularism

Negotiating religious-secular identities in Dhaka

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ABSTRACT

This article elaborates how upper middle-class Muslims in Dhaka, Bangladesh, navigate different ways of being Muslim, including no longer believing, through the spaces they inhabit and the feelings these spaces evoke. Drawing on ethnographic narratives (gathered during eighteen months of fieldwork in Dhaka from 2018 to 2019), heterodoxy (Saeed 2021) and queer phenomenology (Ahmed 2006, 2017), I argue that my interlocutors' feelings orient them towards their religious-secular becomings — a continuous and unfixed form of self-formation that aligns with current movements towards feminist postsecular thinking (Deo 2018; Lépinard 2020) — whilst providing a means to relationally and morally negotiate religious-secular differences. While some of my interlocutors identified as queer, this article focuses on their religious-secular experiences. Taking into account both critiques and moves towards queer-feminist postsecularism in South Asia, I argue that queer-feminist postsecularism offers a way to understand identity and the intimate relationality involved in religious and secular experiences in urban Bangladesh today.

Keywords
postsecularism, Islam, Bangladesh, feminism, queer theory, ethics

Zara mami (maternal uncle's wife) was an upper middle-class woman in her forties, who had been born and raised in Dhaka. Tertiary educated, she held degrees from prestigious universities in Dhaka and the UK; she was married with three children and was at the time of our meeting finishing her PhD in Indonesia. She described to me how she started saying her prayers differently after attending Dhaka's prestigious Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). "When I came to the dorm, I had a roommate who always prayed, and she asked me to say my prayers as well. But I didn't, I don't know why, I just didn't feel comfortable. Later I made friends with people who lived on the floor above me. There was a big room where everyone would come and hang out. We used to study there or just relax. When the *azaan* (call to prayer) came, some people would say *namaaz* (five daily prayers), but they never asked anyone to come. They just went to pray. So I started doing this too, it felt right."

When Zara mami went to study in Indonesia for her PhD, she found a similar dynamic and relationship to prayer amongst other Muslim students. "People at my university and in the town, they would just say their prayers and wear the veil, but they never told anyone else what to do. I don't know why we are like this," she added, referring to a now common trope in Dhaka where people, even strangers, will actively encourage and entreat other Muslims to pray or dress differently. While abroad, she adapted her dress and veiled. "When I came back to Dhaka from Indonesia, everyone thought I would continue veiling. But I didn't. I don't know why I took it off, I liked wearing it over there. I just had this feeling," Zara Mami said, gesturing towards her chest and stomach, "I felt it inside."

Based on ethnographic work conducted in Dhaka between 2018 and 2019, the narratives of Zara Mami and Azia form the backbone of this paper. Like Zara mami, Azia is a cis-gendered woman living in Dhaka and of the upper-middle class (Hutschenreiter 2022). Azia is similarly tertiary educated, in her early thirties, owns property in Dhaka's upmarket Gulshan district, has attended elite Englishmedium schools and universities, and is working in the white-collar development sector. Zara mami is a practising Muslim and navigates her own sense of faith while facing opposition to her way of believing and practising. On the other hand, Azia is an atheist living in a religious household and defining her own sense of what it means not to believe. Rather than view Zara mami as “religious” and Azia as “secular,” I focus on the relationality they share with their peers, families and the spaces they inhabit to show how religious-secular dynamics are a product of Islam and the secular as plural ethical regimes, heterogenous identities and heterodox practices.

I bring together queer and feminist theory, the anthropology of Islam and the anthropology of ethics to argue for a queer postsecularism that allow us to see how Islamic faith and practice and the secular are lived together and enmeshed with plural identities. I use queer similarly to Kasmani in that I understand queer as more than a “figure of sexuality” (2022, 2). Rather, queer theory offers us the possibility to trace how experiences of becoming differently, diverging from norms and particular orthodoxies like heterosexuality or how to be Muslim, take shape. My interlocutors are all middle-class, Muslim and Dhakaiya. Zara mami did not identify as queer, but some of my other interlocutors, like Azia, did. A queer postsecularism in the context of Bangladesh offers a means to understand how these divergent ways of (not) believing are equally born of religious-secular entanglements. They suggest that the religious and the secular are enmeshed experiences and not separate and opposite as they continue to be treated in local popular and academic discourses.

Formerly known as East Pakistan, Bangladesh gained independence from West Pakistan — contemporary Pakistan — in 1971 following a bloody nine-month Liberation War due to economic, cultural, linguistic and religious-secular differences and inequalities imposed by the West Pakistani state (Mookherjee 2015).The country is home to approximately 160 million inhabitants, with a Sunni Muslim majority and minority Hindu, Shia, Buddhist, Christian, Bahai and Ahmadiyya communities (Haider, Rahman and Kamal 2019). Secularism in Bangladesh has, like in India and Pakistan, been associated with the country's religious pluralism (Nair 2023). With the decline in religious diversity and increased persecution of religious minorities, the role of secularism in state bureaucracy and in everyday life continues to be a source of debate (Doha and Jamal 2017). Within these local debates, however, religion and secularism continue to be understood as shaping identities and subjectivities separately (Huq 2021).

I begin by elaborating my approach to the secular and religion as embodied and ethical. I then recount the relationships between secularism, Islam and postsecularism in Bangladesh and South Asia and link this to current debates in feminist literature around agency and belief. I then unpack Zara mami's narrative and show how her heteropraxy speaks to the plural identities approach espoused by feminist scholars pushing towards postsecularist understandings of subjectivity informed by a range of secular and religious orders (Deo 2018; Lépinard 2020). My understanding of heteropraxy here reflects variations in personal Islamic practice rather than heterodox in the sense of belonging to a minority Muslim community (Saeed 2021). I then explore Azia's narrative as a non-believer to develop a queer postsecularism that focuses on my interlocutors' feelings, following Sara Ahmed (2006; 2017), as a vital source underlying the entanglements of religion and the secular in their everyday lives and ethical choices (Mattingly and Throop 2018).

THE SECULAR, ETHICS AND POSTSECULAR POTENTIALS

The understanding of religious and the secular that I follow here is one where ethics takes centre stage. Asad (2003, 21) distinguishes secularism as a political doctrine from the idea of the secular, which he characterises "as an ontology and an epistemology." In Asad's genealogy, the latter precedes the former historically, in that it developed as a series of "concepts, practices and sensibilities" (ibid., 16).

Tejani (2007) and Mahmood (2015) further see these practices and sensibilities as grounded in a range of ethical questions relating to the idea of freedom. Rather than focus on concepts, I instead explore the secular and the religious as ethics through the embodied experiences of Azia and Zara mami in their respective habitual spaces and bodies. I thus follow Scheer, Johansen and Fadil (2019) in their invitation to attend to the emotional and corporeal experience of the secular and, by extension, the religious, by, for instance, pursuing Zara mami's feeling inside. I further draw on an understanding of ethics and morality, which I use interchangeably here, in anthropology as part of all choices made in both everyday and extraordinary settings (Mattingly and Throop 2018). In this sense, all choices are a question of ethics.

The way Zara mami describes how she previously and currently practises Islam, and how other's influence and think of her practice, sheds light on the ethical dimensions of religious-secular experiences. I use the term religious-secular here as a rough portmanteau to reflect the hybrid relationship of the religious and the secular today (Rana 2022). The idea of religious-secular becoming foregrounds what Asad (2003) and Mahmood (2005; 2015) have described as the mutual interdependence of religion and the secular. This becomes apparent in the stories of people like Zara mami, whose experiences complicate the idea of where the secular ends and the religious begins, and how choices around religious faith and practice are made, lived and negotiated in the midst of other people and ways of being. What is important about Zara mami's story is how the embodied feelings she highlights are orienting her actions. This hints at a different form of becoming that does not centre reflection as necessarily guiding action, as most in the anthropology of ethics would have it (Mattingly and Throop 2018, 479). Rather, her feeling inside took on an equally important role in orienting her towards a heterodox practice.

The Bangla word for religion, *dhormo*, refers more broadly to the idea of moral order (Devine and White 2013). And while the term for religious, *dharmik*, is used to describe people, it is much more common to express religiosity through daily prayers (particularly *fajr* prayer performed at sunrise), attending mosque or prayer groups, and daily expressions like *alhamdulillah* (thanks be to God), *inshallah* (if God wills it) or *khoda hafiz* or *allah hafiz* (good bye, may God be your protector; the former is derived from Persian and the latter is thought to be closer to Arabic). Zara mami's narrative brings forward how Islamic practice and faith in Dhaka are interpreted in terms of ethics. The heteropraxy that defines Zara mami's practice and faith is equally rooted in a range of orders underlying Islam and the secular in Bangladesh specifically.

The history of secularism in Bangladesh specifically elucidates how the postsecular provides new ways to perceive the intricacies of Zara mami's plural identities as a religious-secular subject. A first step towards making postsecular perspectives relevant to contemporary formations is "to historicize secular settlements and show their contested nature in order to denaturalize existing divisions of the secular and the religious" (Deo 2018: 10).

Secularism in Bangladesh was long construed by local scholars in the Western sense of a separation of state and religion (Ahmed 2001; Uddin 2006). These authors describe secularism as part of the platform on which the Liberation War of 1971 was waged against West Pakistan, under the leadership of the East Pakistani Awami League party, the same party which forms the government of Bangladesh again today in 2023. The West Pakistani elite developed a discourse in which Islam in East Pakistan (Bangladesh) was not the "right" kind of Islam due to perceived influences from local cultural practices. A commitment to secularism was thought to ensure the religious freedoms of Muslims and religious minorities post-independence (Uddin 2006). Nair (2023, 200) describes how secularism (*dharma-nirappekhata*) was construed by Bangladesh's exiled government during the Liberation War and in the immediate post-war period as no discrimination against any religions, with a particular point of protecting religious minorities (Hindu, Christian and Buddhist primarily), and as a response to the narrative of the West Pakistani army waging a war on Bangladesh in the name of upholding a “correct” form of Islam.

This narrative was used to justify political oppression in East Pakistan by the West Pakistani state, due to the “improper” Islam that was seen to be practised in Bengal. This has been interpreted and discussed by Bangladeshi scholars as an inherent tension between Muslim and Bangali culture, largely influenced by non-Islamic and sometimes specifically Hindu practices, in Muslim Bangali identity (Ahmed 2001). Bangali culture, in this instance, became synonymous for the secular, in that the secular provided a space for Bangali and Muslim practices and identities to co-exist. The idea of secularism, based on safeguarding the religious plurality of the population, however, was vaguely phrased in Bangladesh’s 1972 constitution, which was reinstated as the constitution in 2015 after secularism was removed from it in 1975 under the military regime of General Ziaur Rahman (1977-1981).

A disappointment in the disappearance of the principle of secularism in local politics after Bangladesh’s independence was strongly voiced by local secularist and atheist movements throughout the 1990s and the 2010s, and this critique is often still heard today particularly amongst the middle and upper middle-class (cf. Mookherjee 2015). More recently, Doha and Jamil (2017) describe the confrontations of the secular and atheist protest movements, such as the 2013 Shahbag movement against 1971 war criminals and members of the Jamat-e-Islami party, and Islamic groups like Hefazat-e-Islam who have been gaining support in the last decade for their wish to uphold their orthodox understanding of Islam. These accounts describe a continued emphasis on the separation of the religious and the secular in popular discourse in Bangladesh, something Raqib (2020) has challenged by showing that women’s rights are of equal import to contemporary secularist and Islamic movements.

I follow Deo (2018) and Lépinard (2020) in seeing the postsecular, feminist and queer theory as offering a way beyond the religious-secular divide. For both, postsecular feminism avoids binarism and "destabilizes assumptions about the subject of feminism and the role of choice and agency and invites us to broaden our empathetic imagination" (Deo 2018, 2). One of the assumptions of the secular is that women in particular, and LGBTQIA+ people also, should unanimously desire emancipation in the form of sexual freedom (Mahmood 2005; Braidotti et al. 2014, 5). Moving away from such secular assumptions, scholars in feminist studies have emphasised the need to engage with plural identities. A postsecular perspective means understanding religious people in their entireties, not just as defined by their religious identities (Fadil 2019). Lépinard (2020) speaks of a shift from talking about the individual subject and singular Muslim subjectivity to talking about subjects in the plural sense, as Zara mami's heterodox practice exemplifies. Postsecularism is important in feminist and queer literature in that it allows religious and secular identities to inform feminist and queer understandings of agency. Similarly, Zara mami's heterodox Islamic practice understood in terms of postsecularism provides a way to see her as creating a new way of believing and practising through a relationality between and negotiation of various orthodoxies and orders of Islam and the secular.

HETERODOX PRACTICE AND BELIEVING DIFFERENTLY

Zara mami's choices regarding how she dresses, whether and where she veils and says her prayers, are both her own but also a shared concern between her and the people she lives, works and interacts with in the everyday. I had met Zara mami through my *khala* (maternal aunt) and *khalu* (maternal aunt's husband). I had interviewed her husband, Hashim mama, about a year prior and it was at his insistence that I had asked her if she would share some of her life stories with me too. More specifically, I had asked him if he knew anyone who prays in Bangla rather than in Arabic, and he promptly responded, "Yes, your mami. I always tell her 'You're going to hell'," followed by his boisterous laugh. Hashim mama was being ironic and did not feel any judgement towards Zara mami. But his comment highlights the concerns and judgements other family members and peers have over individual religious practice and belief and the need to navigate and negotiate one's own faith, practice and ethics within one's relationships. "My mother didn't like it when she found out I pray in Bangla. She was very worried and kept telling me not to do this," Zara mami told me. This is very much an expression of concern, as Hashim mama's joke implies, regarding Zara mami's fate in the afterlife. Her practice can further be read as both a heterodox amalgamation of Islamic and secular practise, in that her praying in Bangla is an acceptance of her personal and interiorised relationship to faith and a divergence from orthodox Islamic practises.

While Zara mami prays in Bangla, Hashim mama is a firm believer but refuses to say his prayers. "I don't feel the need to pray, I learned when I was young. But for me religion is a spiritual thing." Though they navigated their diverging senses of faith and practice within their familial life and home space, Zara mami's and Hashim mama's negotiations are also more broadly tied to local Bangladeshi discourses and histories of religious-secular becoming, both as a nation, class and gendered communities, and as individuals.

The concern for individual Muslims faith and practice in Dhaka is a reflection of wider concerns for the majority Muslim community in Bangladesh, the middle-class community, and the global *ummah* (Muslim community). Negotiating Muslim orthodoxies and dealing with shifting markers of the religious and the secular is part of everyday experiences historically and today, in South Asia and globally (Saeed 2021). In this context, thinking of Zara mami's (un)veiling as religious or secular, or as situational ethics wherein people adapt their ethical positions according to the social situations they are in, would not do justice to the kinds of everyday negotiations of individual and collective practice (or lack thereof) self-identifying and presenting Muslims continuously engage in. It also does not allow us to see how their experiences personally and relationally take shape.

This analytical shift to the experiential and relational is important in the context of Dhaka, where both secularist networks (largely located around the nexus of universities near Ramna in south-central Dhaka) and Islamic movements like the Tablighi Jama'at or Hefazat-e-Islam are reflecting non-binaristic potentials. Raqib's (2020) work highlights the desires of Islamic movements to safeguard Islam rather than a specific religious nationalism. This proclamation is understood by the movements' critics as a continuation of the discourse of the West Pakistani ruling elite during the Liberation War, wherein war and genocide in East Pakistan was justified as a fight for Islam. Such critiques, however, also play into the current state's narrative of its legitimacy to rule, as heir to the secularist struggle of the ruling party, which the state itself can only uphold with the support of Islamic parties and groups, like Jamaat-e-Islami (Mookherjee 2015). This highlights that there is something "unsatisfyingly circular" created through the continued distinction of the religious and the secular (Tejani 2007, 4).

The circularity that Tejani (2007) speaks of is at the heart of feminist writings also dealing with postsecularism. Ziya (2018), for example, rejects the postsecular in relation to feminist activism in Pakistan and sees it as a means to legitimise religious usurpation of secular struggles, such as the fight for women's and children's health. More hopefully, Deo (2018) has written of the postsecular as the potential to think more openly and contextually about the interactions of the religious and the secular in India, doing away with the kinds of circular discourses Tejani (2007) highlights as reproducing binaries and, instead, offering alternative understandings of the importance of religion not just to the state, but to people in their daily lives. For Deo, the postsecular alone cannot offer a way out of the binarisms and circularity that is maintained by talking about religious and secular experiences separately, just as feminism alone cannot offer a complete understanding of agency and the meaning (and value) of freedom. Rather, postsecular feminism offers a means to imagine different forms of being and becoming ethical and political subjects.

In this vein, Zara mami does not describe herself as a certain kind of religious person, nor does she understand her unveiling or her change in dress as secular or religious. These are terms that elude her experience. By describing her here as a woman, upper middle-class, Sunni Muslim, married to Hashim mama, with children, running a household and pursuing a career, based in Dhaka with connections abroad, living a heterodox Islamic practice, surrounded by relatives and peers, I highlight her plural identities. Zara mami's choices around how to practise and believe, and others' responses to her choices, reflect competing orthodox understandings of Islam as well as the secular. She is oriented towards a heterodox practice and belief that is shaped by plural experiences, histories and orders of the secular and Islam through time. Thinking here of intersectional identities and becoming (Lépinard 2020) offers a sense of her becoming not as fragmented into secular, religious or otherwise, but continuous and connected (Retsikas 2012). Rather than imagining that Zara mami is a religious subject in a reified sense of the term, it is far more interesting and important to think of her ethical and religious-secular becoming via her heteropraxy amidst the histories of the secular and Islam in Bangladesh, and amongst the people and spaces she inhabits.

ORIENTED BY SPACE AND FEELINGS

Azia belonged to the same social class as Zara mami, having grown up and now still living in Gulshan 2. Unlike Zara mami, Azia identifies as atheist, using the word in English rather than the Bangla word *nastik*. "I don't believe in God or organised religion. But I tried," she explained, "I tried to be Muslim, I tried to be Christian. There was a time when I would pray and study the Quran a lot and I actually really liked some of the verses, they're very powerful." We met through a mutual friend Isa, who was also a researcher. The day we had this conversation was in early 2019 at her apartment in Gulshan 2, where she lived with her mother and maids in one apartment, and her paternal relatives in an adjacent apartment connected by a glass door.

What is important in Azia's story is not only the fact of being atheist, but rather that this was a process of multiple orientations. "My father is a Dawkins atheist. He raised me to be atheist. When my mom or others would be praying or reading the Quran, he would say, 'you don't believe in this, do you?' But I didn't want to be like him. So I really tried to be religious." Whatever form of atheism or religiosity she followed, Azia wanted it to come from herself. Her story conveys the need to think of feeling and movement towards other ways of being that are partly personal and ethical, partly socially prescribed, and very much propelled through feeling.

"I didn't want to be like my dad, but then I couldn't be religious. I really tried. I just couldn't feel it." The way that Azia's feelings figure here mirrors the turn to emotions within discussions of South Asian history (Chatterjee, Krishnan and Robb 2017). Pernau (2019) has argued that rather than moderation of feeling, as has been commonly emphasised, a change to impassioned fervour is evident in Urdu writings of the later colonial period. In similar vein, Azia and Zara Mami were very clear about how their choices were very much oriented by their relations to people, objects and space.

Azia is engaged in an intense relationality marked by negotiation with her family and peers, outside as well as at home. Following Zigon (2009) and Louw (2018), I understand moral negotiation as a process involving reflection, the (re)production of values and discernment of these when making choices that are part and parcel of ethical life. My approach draws on Zigon's (2009) phenomenologically inspired work which centres individual experience, plurality and negotiation; and on Louw's (2018) more recent account of "moral emotions" amongst Uzbekh Sufis. The moral emotions Louw describes are a kind of haunting, a spectre of choices that could have been made. This speaks to the kinds of feelings or lack thereof that Azia describes. I take up these very individual feelings but in relation to the negotiations that are necessary when living in a complex relational environment, which Azia inhabits. Both feeling and moral negotiation are equally individualistic and very collective processes.

This dynamic takes on clearer contours in Ahmed's queer phenomenology and orientation (2006; 2017). Ahmed offers a way for anthropologists to explore more fully how different paths are followed and chosen in the midst of normative pressures. She uses the notion of orientation to think about how feelings towards objects and spaces can direct us and the ethical choices we make. Orientation is the process by which we find "our own way in the world by situating ourselves in relation to others" (Ahmed 2006, 6). This becomes the basis of intersubjective social differences (ibid., 5). Power, Ahmed writes, "works as a mode of directionality, a way of orientating bodies in particular ways, so they are facing a certain way, heading toward a future that is given a face" (Ahmed 2017, 43). While some paths are given or encouraged through dynamics of power, such as a heteronormative life, deviations from these are made possible through feelings, disorientation and reorientation (Ahmed 2006, 21). Objects, like gendered toys, take on an orientating function, "as you become aware of how the social world is organized, norms appear as palpable things" (Ahmed 2017, 43). This power of objects further leads to the potential for them to become material allies in processes of reorientiation. This becomes clearer when we focus on the spatiality of Azia's home and the relations that constituted its materiality.

To the right of the entrance of Azia's home was a glass door that sectioned off her and her relatives' apartments. Azia and her mother lived on one side, with one bedroom occupied by their maids (*bua, kajer lok*), while her aunt, uncle, cousins and their children live on the other. Food and maids moved across this threshold everyday, as did the children. One afternoon, towards the end of my stay in Dhaka, I passed by Azia's to say hello. As she often worked on weekends, I knew I would be able to find her at home. Her baby cousin came in from the other side of the glass door on the arm of one of the maids and Azia promptly scooped him up. At the same time, Azia's mother, happy to see me, went not to her own kitchen, but through the glass door to their relatives' apartment to fetch some *dud cha* (black tea with milk and sugar). While Azia's mother habitually moved easily across this border, Azia did not.

Religion and lifestyle choices are a cause of this simultaneous permeability and impermeability. Azia often remarked on the religiosity of her relatives, which she did not agree with, and implied that they are equally uncomfortable with her lifestyle choices. Azia explained, "they don't like how I live, but I don't care. I dress how I want, I come home late, I drink, I smoke. This is my home." She would drink and smoke openly, not minding her mother or other relatives seeing her (through the glass door). In the context of Dhaka, this is no mean feat, even within families where drinking and smoking may be normal. Doing so openly, especially as a young person in the family and particularly as a woman, is not easy. Speaking of their family dynamics, Azia explained, "we hardly speak. They are very religious, and they try to tell others how to live."

Azia actively made space for herself within a shared home, creating or lending itself to existing frictions, not only for the sake of resistance, but for her continuous becoming. Looking at the space she inhabits and creates for herself and in relation to others provides a unique insight into how people of different religious-secular identities navigate their differences continuously through everyday interactions. Ahmed's (2017) idea of orientation, and the spatialisation of experiences of change and redirecting oneself, brings forward the relations that were inimical to Azia's experience of religion and becoming as an atheist in the context of middle-class Dhaka and a Muslim household. Ahmed (2017) thus understands power not only as a set of relations that subjugate a subject, but they make the conditions possible through which a subject can exist and enact agency as well (Mahmood 2001). In this sense, orientation is not only an act of power, but itself also makes acting differently and reorienting, outside of normative paths, possible.

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Though Azia experiences friction, at the same time, there is constant movement and exchange across the glass door. Moreover, her mother was dedicated to her own religious practice, saying her prayers on time every day and practising Quranic recitations. A variety of religious-secular lifestyles thus cohabited in a way that is common for upper middle-class Dhaka households. I see the glass door as dividing and connecting the spaces of a shared home. The glass door allows for heterogeneity and living with difference, even when it seems to be creating essentialising factions on either side of a material divide. The glass door operates as a metaphor for the queering of postsecularism in Bangladesh. In Azia's home, religious-secular becomings and differing lifestyles are equally morally negotiated through relations across space.

Ahmed's (2006; 2017) centring on feelings and spaces allows for an engagement of a range of identities and experiences at once, something important for speaking about Muslim people who also identify, or are identified as, of specific classes, cultural groups, schools of Muslim thought, genders and so on (Fadil 2019). Azia is not just atheist, she is Bangali in a predominantly Bangali community, she is an urban citizen, of the upper-middle class, a resident of Gulshan, a woman, queer, identified as Muslim by her name but self-identifying as atheist. The way Ahmed (2017) theorises queer difference extends beyond queer identities and allows anthropologists to conceive of the experiential qualities of lived religious-secular differences. Looking at the feelings Azia describes in the context of her home space and her family relations allows us to understand her experience, her choices and negotiations of her atheism and abstinence from religious practices as an orientation. In her home, Azia orients herself by creating a space that is conducive to her ethics and lifestyle, but she is also oriented by the separating fluidity of the glass door which simultaneously connects and dissociates her from her family and their ethics.

Azia and Zara mami in Dhaka are both oriented by different religious and secular orders, their gender, class and the spaces they inhabit, but also by alternate feelings that allow for different kinds of choices to be made. Moral negotiation is then part of their process to make space for themselves in Dhaka and in the world. Being Muslim or atheist are not fixed experiences. In the moment of postsecularism described by Braidotti et al. (2014) and Lépinard (2020), layers of identities need to be attended to when trying to understand religious-secular experiences. Moral negotiation and orientation together can offer a better grasp of how the religious and the secular are experientially entangled. While moral negotiation carries with it a sense of awareness of my interlocutors' different life choices, orientation offers an understanding of how differences take place, shaped by and shaping people and the spaces they inhabit today.

CONCLUSION

Postsecularism is important in feminist and queer literature in allowing scholars to debate how religious and secular identities as well as lived experiences can inform feminist and queer understandings of agency. In Braidotti's (2008, 2) words, "the postsecular turn challenges European feminism because it makes manifest the notion that agency, or political subjectivity, can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety." In anthropology so far, and in Bangladesh compared to other South Asian countries, the postsecular has remained elusive despite the powerful role anthropologists like Saba Mahmood have played in bringing these debates to the fore (Lépinard 2020, 6).

By foregrounding a range of Islamic and secular orders, space and feelings, we can speak about a range of religiosities and complexities of belief and non-belief, and their cohabitation. This allows us to speak of plural identities and layered experiences together when speaking about Muslim people. By speaking of Zara mami and Azia together — two women in Dhaka who live very different lives and share differing religious-secular experiences whilst being of the same class — I have sought to undo the tendency towards separating so-called religious subjects from other kinds of subjectivities. Queer theory allows us to look at postsecularism in a way that does not do away with either religion or the secular, a fear which some scholars have voiced (Mahmood 2015, 22). By looking at how people like Zara mami and Azia use and feel in their habitual spaces, how it orients them towards something new, we come closer to understanding religious-secular dynamics through a lens of heterogeneous experience.

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