Creating Queer Livable Spaces: Queer Muslims' Use of Education as a Migration Strategy

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Abstract

My thesis explores the link between education and queer migration and how queer Muslims create queer livable spaces for themselves through educational migration. The research on queer migration has been heavily centered on asylum policies and practices with little research about the alternative methods of migration. Based on 14 in-depth, semi structured interviews and autoethnographic reflections and centering the concepts of livability and queer livable space, my research fills this gap in queer migration studies. It highlights the use of educational opportunities by queer Muslims to migrate from their countries of origin where they are faced with homophobia and/or fear of prosecution to queer friendly locations to create queer livable spaces for themselves. The educational migration allows queer Muslims financial stability and social standing which makes it easier for them to navigate and defy the expectations of marriage and heteronormativity from their families and countries of origin as well as Islamophobia, xenophobia, homophobia, and homonormativity in the countries of migration. In this queer livable space, they are able to maintain familial ties with their biological families, if they wish, while creating new communities, (chosen) families, and a sense of belonging. Developing the concept of queer livable space, I argue that queer livable space that queer Muslims create through educational migration is an alternative as well as resistance to the western notions of queerness and visibility paradigm.

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

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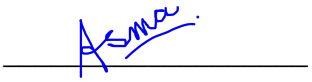

Signed: Asma Noureen

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2016, my same-sex partner and I came out to a professor with whom we both had taken a gender studies course during our undergraduate studies. My partner was struggling with immigration system of the United Arab Emirate (UAE) to join me in Abu Dhabi where I was working at that time. Our professor suggested that we seek asylum in one of the western countries that grant asylum to LGBTQ people whose life is at threat because of their non-normative gender and/or queer identity. Her suggestion to seek asylum was due to a genuine concern for our well-being and togetherness as queer Muslim women who were faced with constant pressure of heterosexual marriage from our families and were finding it hard to be together in one place. As we examined the option of seeking asylum, we decided against it because of the inherent precarity and violence in the asylum-seeking processes which we found unlivable for us.

My partner and I hail from South Asia, Pakistan and Bangladesh to be precise, where homosexuality is criminalized, same-sex partnerships are unheard of, and same-sex marriage is impossible. From the beginning of our relationship, we knew that we could not make a home together in either of our countries of origin, the countries we love and feel belonged to. We knew that we had to migrate to a third country to be able to live together. When I found a job in Abu Dhabi and move there in 2015, my partner could not join me for over a year because of the legal restrictions for Bangladeshis in the UAE. Even when she made it there and we could be together, we lived in a constant fear of being outed and prosecuted as homosexuality is criminalized in the UAE as well. Over the years, it became clear that if we wanted to have a meaningful life together without the constant fear of violence, we had to migrate to an LGBTQ-friendly country, probably in the west. As South Asian, Muslim women with good education

but limited means, pursuit of higher education became our means to make such a move and create a queer livable space for ourselves. A space that would allow us to be us, to be together, and to be in love. A space where we could express different aspects of our identities simultaneously without having to lose one because of the other. A space where we could maintain some kind of harmonious relationship with our biological families while creating new and queer ones.

In my own processes of trying to move away from Pakistan and later the UAE, I observed that many queer people, similarly, utilize educational opportunities to navigate their way out of their countries of origin and make their way towards Europe and North America (considered to be queer friendlier locations) so they can live their lives on their own terms. When I moved to Budapest and started this MA in Critical Gender Studies, I found out that my partner and I were not the only queer Muslims who were trying to migrate from their countries of origin to queer friendlier locations through the pursuit of higher educational opportunities. As I engaged with my queer classmates and discussed my observation, I realized that livability is at the heart of such decisions and the prestige and empowering aspects of education make it a more livable option for queer Muslims to use education as a strategy to migrate to the west instead of seeking asylum. Centering the concept of livability, I became interested in exploring the following questions: how queer Muslims define queer livable space and how they create such a space through educational migration? In this research, I explore these questions through in-depth, semi structured interviews with 14 queer Muslims and autoethnographic reflections to argue that queer livable spaces that queer Muslims are trying to create through educational migration is an alternative as well as resistance to the western notions of queerness and visibility paradigm. I focus on queer Muslims because the need to migrate becomes much more urgent given the political and social exclusion and persecution of the non-normative sexual and

gender identities in most Muslim majority countries and the lived experiences of queer Muslims including myself.

1.1 Socio-political Context

Participants of this research come from diffident Muslim majority countries in South Asia and Middle East such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Morocco, and Turkey. They have pursued (or are pursuing) higher education in the USA and some European countries such as Hungary, Austria, Germany, France, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the UK. A few of them have returned to their home countries after completing their education while most of them are currently based either in the countries they have studied or in a third country. These demographics make it difficult to situate this research in once single context. Nevertheless, a brief description of the socio-political situations of both the Muslim majority countries of origin and the western countries of migration can help us understand the overall context and the decisions queer Muslims make.

Out of seventy-eight countries that have criminal laws and penal sanctions related to sexual orientation, non-normative sexual behavior and gender identity, half of them are Muslim-majority or *Sharia*-compliant countries.[1] For example, same-sex sexual relations are punished by death, imprisonment, and/or other brutal punishments such as public stoning and lashes in countries like Iran, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, Sudan, Qatar, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Malaysia, Maldives, and Bangladesh. These countries with legal prosecution of LGBTQ also have the highest levels of homophobia and intolerance towards the gender and sexual minorities.[2] These legal and social attitudes are often claimed to be justified through Islamic ideology. Even though some Muslim scholars and theologists, mostly situated in the

[1] Javaid Rehman, and Eleni Polymenopoulou, "Is Green a Part of the Rainbow? Sharia, Homosexuality and LGBT Rights in the Muslim World," *SSRN Electronic Journal* 37, no. 1 (2013): 3.
[2] Rehman and Polymenopoulou, 4.

west, are engaged in reinterpreting the Quran and other Islamic scriptures to understand Islamic view on homosexuality and make space for non-normative sexualities in Muslim societies,[3] the Muslim-majority societies refuse to recognize the existence of LGBTQ individuals in their communities. Momin Rahman, in his book *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures, and Modernity,* associates this antipathy of Muslim societies towards homosexuality and sexual diversity as their reaction to the western modernity.[4]

Such attitudes not only result in legal prosecution and homophobia but also tangible violence against the LGBTQ members within their community. For example, in 2014, a Pakistani man killed three gay men by alluring them to meet him through a social networking site for gay men, sending shivers of fear among the queer community in Pakistan.[5] Similarly, in 2015 and 2016 in Bangladesh, many LGBTQ activists, journalists, and publishers were attacked and killed because of their support of the LGBTQ movement in the country.[6] Five out of six participants from Bangladesh mentioned the killings of the LGBTQ activists in 2015-16 as one of the determining factors for them to leave Bangladesh as they felt unsafe. These episodes of violence are not usually investigated fairly because those violated are also considered criminals. Discrimination and violence against the LGBTQ people are not only common in the countries where homosexuality is illegal and criminalized, but also in other Muslim countries such as Jordan where no such criminalizing laws exist. Arrests of LGBTQ individuals and public and political bashing of the community members and activists are also

[3] Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims,* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010); Junaid B. Jahangir and Hussein Abdul-latif, "Investigating the Islamic Perspective on Homosexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality* 63, no. 7 (July 2, 2016).
[4] Momin Rahman, *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity,* Palgrave Politics of Identity and Citizenship Series (Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[5] Waqar Gillani and Declan Walsh, "Pakistani Says He Killed 3, Using Gay Site to Lure Them," *The New York Times,* sec. World (April 28, 2014). https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/29/world/asia/pakistani-man-confesses-to-using-gay-sites-to-lure-victims.html.
[6] Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury, "A Publisher's Disclaimer about LGBTIQ+ Solidarity," *শুদ্ধস্বর,* (August 1, 2020). https://shuddhashar.com/a-publishers-disclaimer-about-lgbtiq-solidarity-ahmedur-rashid-chowdhury/.

common happenings in Jordan as well.[7] One of the reasons Aliya, a Jordanian participant, decided to leave Jordan was also the constant fear of arrest and police violence because of her LGBTQ activism. Due to these socio-political conditions in the Muslim majority countries, most queer people live a life of hiding and fear due to the fear of violent consequences and aspire to migrate to western countries with comparatively liberal and LGBTQ friendly laws and social norms so they can live and express themselves without fear.

On the other hand, the LGBTQ rights movement has taken momentum around the world in the last two decades, particularly in the aftermath of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in 1980s and 1990s in Europe and North America, resulting in changes in the social and legal systems, including the immigration systems.[8] For example, the US government lifted the ban on lesbian and gay immigrants on entering the US in 1990 and deemed them eligible to seek asylum in the US against prosecution in their countries of origin in 1994.[9] Similarly, the European Parliament also encouraged its state members to decriminalize homosexuality and the European Union introduced the EU Employment Equality Directive to prohibit employment discrimination against LGBTQ in 2000.[10] The Netherlands became the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage in 2001. Since then, 29 countries around the world, most of them in Western Europe and Americas, have legalized same-sex marriage and some countries have legalized registration of same-sex civil partnership though not marriage.[11] While

[7] MJ Movahedi, "Gay-Bashing in Jordan—by the Government," *Human Rights Watch (blog)*, (August 30, 2017). https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/08/30/gay-bashing-jordan-government.
[8] Martin F. Manalansan, "Queer Intersections: Sexuality and Gender in Migration Studies," The International Migration Review 40, no. 1 (2006).
[9] Manalansan, 231.
[10] Régis Schlagdenhauffen, "Gay Rights and LGBTQI Movements in Europe," *Digital Encyclopedia of European History*, (June 22, 2020). https://ehne.fr/en/encyclopedia/themes/gender-and-europe/demographic-transition-sexual-revolutions/gay-rights-and-lgbtqi-movements-in-europe; Darla Cameron and Richard Johnson, "How Gay Rights Have Spread around the World over the Last 224 Years," *The Washington Post*, (2015). https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/gay-rights-history/.
[11] Michael Lipka and David Masci, "Where Europe Stands on Gay Marriage and Civil Unions," *Pew Research Center (blog)*, (October 28, 2019). https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/28/where-europe-stands-on-gay-marriage-and-civil-unions/; US, Business Insider, "The 29 countries around the world where same-sex marriage is legal," *Business Insider Nederland*, (May 28, 2020). https://www.businessinsider.nl/where-is-same-sex-marriage-legal-world-2017-11/; Cameron and Johnson, "How Gay Rights Have Spread."

most European countries are slowly introducing legal rights for LGBTQ individuals and implementing anti-discrimination laws and regulations, Hungary has taken the opposite direction by abolishing the Equal Treatment Authority in 2020, banning the inclusion of homosexuality and trans issues in sex education or any propagation of LGBTQ rights in schools, and denying the right to adoption for gays and lesbians in 2021.[12]

Though the struggle for inclusion, equality, and protection of LGBTQ individuals in the legal systems is slow and on-going in most of the western countries, the positive legal changes have happened hand in hand with a wider social acceptance of LGBTQ individuals in these countries. These changes have also popularized the discourses of coming out and being proud as the "right" expression of belonging to LGBTQ community, engaging LGBTQ people around the world in local and transnational activism for their rights to create queer friendly spaces and evoking a desire among many LGBTQ individuals to migrate towards these queer friendly western countries, even if a better life is not guaranteed there due to the prevalent Islamophobia and xenophobia (and homophobia) in these countries.[13] Enes Bayrakli and Farid Hafez assert in the "European Islamophobia Report 2020" that Islamophobia has increased in most of the European countries,[14] including in online spaces especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, and "anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim and other racist hate crimes are increasing at an alarming rate."[15] For example, in 2020, the documented number of anti-Muslim hate crimes more than doubled from 2019 in Austria and France and Muslim (especially with migration background) faced higher levels of discrimination and hate crimes in the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands.[16] Similarly, right-wing extremism and political hate speech against refugees

[12] "Hungary," *Annual Review 2022*, ILGA, February 2022, https://www.ilga-europe.org/annualreview/2022.
[13] Enes Bayrakli and Farid Hafez, eds., "European Islamophobia Report 2020" (Leopold Weiss Institute, 2021), https://islamophobiareport.com/islamophobiareport.pdf.
[14] Bayrakli and Farid Hafez, 6.
[15] Bayrakli and Farid Hafez, 14.
[16] Bayrakli and Farid Hafez, 29-31.

and Muslims is also becoming a common rhetoric in Germany, Austria, and France causing further rise in Islamophobia, xenophobia, and hate crimes. These socio-political conditions also shape queer Muslims' decision to migrate using educational opportunities instead of seeking asylum. Education also allows them to gain a respectful status in these migrated locations decreasing the possibility of Islamophobia, xenophobia, and homophobia directed at the refugees.

1.2 Significance of the Research in Migration and Queer Migration Studies

Migration is defined as a change of usual residence to another country for at least a duration of 12 months and can be temporary and/or permanent.[17] Historically, the focus of migration studies has been either on economic theories about the process of movement through push and pull factors explaining the movements of people from low-wage to high-wage areas and poor to wealthier countries or on the integration theories about the process of settlement such as assimilation of migrants into host societies and multiculturalism.[18] These theories have been foundational to the migration studies, particularly in the 20th century explaining the inflow of labor migrants in the industrialized countries during the post-war period. However, these theories do not take into consideration many other socio-political factors, such as gender, sexuality, love, and religion in shaping the desire, decision, and methods of migration. Feminist historians started criticizing androcentrism and uncovering migrant women's voices and histories in the migration scholarship since 1970s.[19] However, this focus on gender also

[17] Anna Triandafyllidou, "Migration and Asylum in the Twenty-First Century," In *Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016): 4.
[18] See for example, Douglas S. Massey et al., "Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal," *Population and Development Review* 19, no. 3 (1993); Karen O'Reilly, "Migration Theories: A Critical Overview," in *Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies*, ed. Anna Triandafyllidou (London: Routledge, 2016).
[19] Suzanne M. Sinke, "Gender and Migration: Historical Perspectives," *International Migration Review* 40, no. 1 (2006).

exclusively remained on heteronormative gender and women's roles within the heteronormative family.[20] Only around the turn of the twenty-first century, migration scholars have started critically engaging on the issue of sexuality, particularly queer sexualities, in the migration and diaspora studies.[21]

Queer sexuality has been considered a core aspect in migration studies since 1990s due to the development of queer studies after the AIDS crisis and intellectual and political engagements with sexuality as a field of study.[22] Eithne Luibhéid and Martin Manalansan call on migration scholars to explore connections and intersections between sexuality and migration. Manalansan highlights three existing trends and themes in the gender and migration studies, queer asylum, queer settlement and assimilation, and shifting notions of female sexuality, arguing that there is a substantial need to further this field of study.[23] While the three areas he highlighted have much developed during the last decade and a half, especially the research on queer asylum.[24] I believe it is time to explore new links, such as between education, religion, and queer migration. It is important to explore these links to understand how overlapping regimes of knowledge and power shape and reshape identities and how queer Muslims negotiate with such regimes through pursuit of education and migration to create livable spaces for themselves.

Similarly, Luibhéid proposes some questions to consider, for example, "how gender and sexuality are related to the decision to migrate and how they organize migration processes,"[25] and this is the direction I take in my thesis research. I explore how queerness,

[20] Eithne Luibhéid, "Heteronormativity and Immigration Scholarship: A Call for Change," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, no. 2 (April 1, 2004).
[21] Eithne Luibhéid, "Queer/Migration: An Unruly Body of Scholarship," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008).
[22] Manalansan, 226.
[23] Manalansan, 231-236.
[24] See for example the literature review section on asylum research.
[25] Luibhéid, "Heteronormativity and Immigration Scholarship," 228.

non-normative sexuality and gender, play an important role in the migration decisions of queer Muslims and the approach they take to such migration. It is not only the aspiration for higher education or better economic prospects that shape their decisions to migrate to western locations, but their desire to explore and express their non-normative gender and sexual identities in safer environments while maintaining a respectable social standing in their families and countries of origin. Through this research, I hope to expand the field of queer migration by arguing that queer Muslims' strategic use of educational opportunities in the west to migrate from their home countries is a method of queer migration through which these people not only negotiate the legal frameworks of queer migration, particularly of the asylum seeking process, but also navigate the expectations of marriage and heteronormativity in the home countries and Islamophobia, xenophobia and homonormativity in the destination countries. The ways they choose to express themselves in their origin and migrated locations shape their queer livable spaces uniquely which are also a critique and resistance to the western notions of queerness and in/visibility paradigms.

1.3 Chapter Breakdown

My thesis is divided into six main chapters. This first chapter introduces and situates this research geographically as well as in the existing queer migration studies and provides the aim and significance of the research. The second chapter provides an overview of the research methods and design, data collection and analysis process and the ethical consideration for this research. The next chapter reviews the literature, theories and concepts that foreground my research and support my analysis. The last three chapters present and analyze the narratives of the queer Muslim participants of this research. The fourth chapter analyzes the unlivable conditions queer Muslims face in their countries of origin due to the prevalent homophobia, fear of prosecution, physical and emotional abuse, and the pressures of marriage and

heteronormativity because of which they decide to migrate from their countries of origin. The fifth chapter analyzes how pursuit of higher education abroad becomes a strategy of migration for these queer Muslims and why they prefer educational migration over other means of migration, including asylum. The sixth and final chapter offers insights about how queer Muslims define queer livable space and how they are trying to create such livable spaces for themselves through educational migration. I conclude this thesis with the implications of this research and provide some recommendations.

Chapter 2: Methodology

The following section will overview the research methods and practical, ethical, and theoretical considerations. My research methodology is informed by postcolonial feminist ethnography that addresses the issues of positionality of the researcher and representation of the researched and requires the researcher to engage in critical self-reflection throughout the research and writing. This reflexive practice helps the researcher recognize the intersections of their voice, place, and privilege, and the political nature of the research, especially when it is produced within the western academy about the non-western subjects.[26] Therefore, in addition to interviews, the main method of data collection for this research, I also bring in autoethnographic reflections throughout the thesis to analyze my own experiences in relation to the participants' to understand these experiences in our social contexts.

2.1 Research Methods and Design

2.1.1 In-dept, semi-structured interviews and autoethnography

As I aim to understand the narratives and experiences of queer Muslims, including myself, who use education as a strategy of migration to escape gender and sexual norms in their societies and create livable spaces, in-depth semi structured interviews with autoethnographic reflections are the most appropriate methods for my research. I decided on a qualitative approach of in-depth semi structured interviews because of its effectiveness for tracing life stories and understanding experiences of queer people.[27] In-depth semi-structured

[26] Jennifer Manning, "Constructing a Postcolonial Feminist Ethnography," *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 5, no. 2 (2016): 90–105; Also see Rabia Ali, "Rethinking Representation: Negotiating Positionality, Power and Space in the Field," *Gender, Place &Amp; Culture* 22, no. 6 (May 21, 2014): 783-800.
[27] Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, eds. "Introduction: Close Encounters." In *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History,* (Oxford Oral History Series. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

interviews create space for collaboration between the researcher and the researched and allow both the participant and the researcher to narrate their lived realities in mutually trusted and safe environment and to record memories of queer genders, sexualities, and desires. The narrator (an interviewee) can share their life story in the presence of an active listener (the interviewer) who engages in a conversation not only by asking interesting questions but also reciprocating the story by sharing snippets from her own life.[28] I conducted 14 in-depth, semi structured interviews of queer Muslims who have sought educational opportunities abroad, mostly in the west as a migration strategy.

I have also incorporated short autoethnographic reflections as part of the analysis in this research because it allows me as a researcher to position myself in relation to my research by situating my own experiences as a queer Pakistani Muslim woman who have actively used education and employment abroad to navigate the marriage pressure and conventional gender norms in the analysis of my research. According to Stacy Holman Jones and Tony E. Adams, autoethnography is a queer method because it allows to "put the 'autobiographical and personal' in conversation with the 'cultural and social'" as it extracts meaning from lived experiences and locates these experiences "in tension with the dominant expressions of discursive power.[29] Autoethnography as a research method not only challenges the idea of "legitimate" knowledge production (e.g. objective and process oriented) and traditional writing conventions (token reflexivity), but also allows for personal voice of marginalized groups such as queer migrants and an emotion-based, subjective and reflexive self-study.[30] As this research is about an alternative strategy (pursuit of higher education) for queer migration and livability,

[28] Valerie Raleigh Yow, "Chapter 4: Interviewing Techniques." In *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences,* 2nd ed., (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005):15.
[29] Stacy Holman Jones and Tony E. Adams, "Autoethnography Is a Queer Method," In *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research,* edited by Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash, 1st ed., (London: Routledge, 2010):192
[30] Sarah Wall, "An Autoethnography on Learning About Autoethnography," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 2 (June 2006): 3-5.

this alternative and non-normative research method fits well in this context. As a queer Muslim myself, I sought to collaborate with the participants of my research in this knowledge production about our experiences, reasons, and choices of migration and creation of livable spaces through education.

2.1.2 Selection of queer Muslims as research participants

For this research, I conceptualized the terms "queer" and "Muslim" loosely to include people who self-identify with both identities and have sought educational opportunities in the west to migrate from the countries of their origin. I used queer as an umbrella term to describe non-heterosexual, non-normative, and gender alternative/non-confirming individuals. Similarly, I used Muslim for those who identify with Islam religiously, culturally, or both, and/or by birth into a Muslim family. Queer and Muslim are identities that are often considered mutually exclusive by the conservative Muslims as well as the liberal west,[31] and "queer Muslims as an intersectional identity exist at the intersections of homophobia and Islamophobia."[32] However, the existence of queer Muslim subjects defies this mutual exclusivity and understanding their lived realities offers a productive space to move beyond the divide between the "conservative" Muslim world and the "liberal" western world.

2.1.3 Participant recruitment and data collection

The interviews were conducted between February and October 2020, and most of them took place in August and September. Initially it was difficult to find interviewees. I started with interviewing two people I knew, who were keen to participate in my research and with whose help I developed this project. Simultaneously, I started posting the interview call as a google

[31] Momin Rahman, *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity,* Palgrave Politics of Identity and Citizenship Series (Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 108-109.
[32] Rahman, 132.

form and posters (included as Appendix 1) on Facebook and Instagram pages of many queer Muslim groups and asked my queer friends to circulate the call in their circles. Part of the difficulty of finding participants in the beginning might be that I could not share details about myself being queer Muslim on these public platforms due to my own and my partner's safety. While it is ethically important for the researcher to take into consideration the participants' safety in research on sensitive topics like this one, it is equally important to make sure that the researcher herself is also safe while conducting the research. I designed the google form and posters for the interview participation call keeping in mind the safety of both the participants and myself. I provided my university email address for further queries as well as to seek credibility as a student researcher by demonstrating my association with an academic institution. Once the initial contact with a prospective participant was established, it became easier to build rapport by sharing further details about myself and schedule the interview. Throughout the summer, I kept sharing the interview call on different social media platforms and through emails to reach the potential participants. By late summer, the participant recruitment got a momentum through snowball effect[33] when some participants and queer organizations started connecting me with more participants. However, this also resulted in an imbalanced percentage of participants from two main locations, Bangladesh and Jordan. I interviewed six Bangladeshis and four Jordanians (two of whom grew up in Saudi Arabia and one of them is of Palestinian descent), two Egyptians who grew up in the UAE, one Turkish, and one Moroccan. This is not a representative sample of queer Muslims as a group, thus, the findings from my research cannot and should not be applied to all queer Muslims. Instead, this research should be seen as situated knowledge, to use Donna Haraway's term,[34] because all

[33] Charlie Parker, Sam Scott, and Alistair Geddes, "Snowball Sampling," In *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*, edited by Paul Atkinson, Sara Delamont, Alexandru Cernat, Joseph W. Sakshaug, and Richard A. Williams (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2019).

[34] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575-599.

participants come from very different socio-economic, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, even when some of them may share a national identity and all of them identify as queer and Muslim. Nonetheless, my research findings shed some important light on the lives of queer Muslims seeking livable lives outside their home countries using education.

Out of 14 interviewees, half of them identified as women, four as men, and three as non-binary who were assigned female at birth. Participants' age ranged between 21 and 32 years old with the mean age being 27 years at the time of the interviews. Most (9 out of 14) participants were either pursuing their MA degrees or working after an MA, only 2 participants were pursuing PhDs and 3 were studying for bachelor's degrees. All participants spoke English fluently and the interviews were conducted mostly in English with some references in Bengali, Hindi and Urdu. As queer Muslims are a heterogenous group coming from different regional, ethnic, linguistic, and national backgrounds, it was not possible for me to recruit interviewees without some fluency of English and having a translator was not a feasible option. This narrowed my selection of participants; therefore, I decided to interview all the people who showed interest and fit the basic criteria of the research regardless of their regional and linguistic backgrounds. It is also important to keep in mind that all participants come from a certain middle class socio-economic background which enables them to seek higher education abroad and initiate their migration processes through pursuing educational opportunities in the west.

Due to the Covid-19 travel restrictions in March 2020, most of the interviews (10 out of 14) were conducted online in line with the e-interview guide by Janet Salmons.[35] Initially, I had planned to interview people based in Europe where I could travel during the summer 2020 and meet and observe the participants while collecting the data. However, it became impossible

[35] Janet Salmons, *Qualitative Online Interviews: Strategies, Design, and Skills*, Second Edition, (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2015).

to do so because of the closure of international borders and travel restrictions due to Covid-19 pandemic. While the move to online interviewing limited my interactions with participants beyond the online interview space, it opened up the opportunity for me to interview some queer Muslims based in the USA, instead of only interviewing those in Europe. Participants also seemed more comfortable in the online space and could spare longer hours for our conversations. All participants were provided information about the research, its purpose, and their right to withdraw their participation at any point during and after the interview. Most participants signed an informed consent form (Appendix 2) before the interview, and some gave oral consent in the beginning of the interview and sent the signed consent form after the interview. The interviews were of varying length from one and a half hour to four hours, a few of them in more than one sitting. All interviews were recorded on my phone, kept in a locked folder, and coded with thematic keywords with bookmarks option in my phone. All the recordings were also copied to my computer's internal memory in a locked folder to keep an additional copy in case the phone breaks down. As most of the interviews were longer than 2 hours, I decided not to transcribe all the interviews in their entirety to save time. Instead, I listened to each interview multiple times, coded the audio files, created a detailed profile of each participant with the core thematic questions, and transcribed only the necessary sections that are used in the thesis.

2.1.4 Data analysis

I have taken a general inductive approach to my research, starting with data collection through interviewing, then looking at the key patterns and themes that emerged from these interviews, and finally drawing upon them and developing the analysis. The general inductive approach to research is often used in qualitative social science research to focus on findings that emerge from "the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in the raw data,

without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies."[36] In this approach, the data is, first, condensed into a brief summary (key patterns and themes); second, links between the research questions/objectives and the summary are established; and then a framework of the underlying structure of experiences and/or processes is developed, and theory is derived from it.[37] This approach does not require an in-depth knowledge and understanding of any specialist analysis methods from the beginning of the research and can combine a number of different methods. As interviews provide the main data of this research, the thematic analysis will be mostly based on the interviews. I will be drawing upon some relevant autoethnographic moments from my own life to connect, relate, reflect, and position myself as one of the queer Muslims trying to create a queer livable space through educational migration. This approach suits not only my current knowledge about analytical methodologies but also my research project as the aim is to understand the narratives and experiences of queer Muslims who use education as a strategy of migration to escape gender and sexual norms in their societies and create queer livable spaces for themselves.

2.2 A Note on Positionality

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, reflecting on my positionality is crucial for this research. Reflection on the researcher's positionality is not only important when the researched is "the Other"[38] but also equally important when the researcher identifies with the researched culturally or regionally[39] because of the power dynamics during the data collection and writing processes. Being a queer Muslim who have sought educational and employment opportunities abroad to move away from my hometown in Pakistan to avoid the pressure of

[36] David R. Thomas, "A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data," *American Journal of Evaluation* 27, no. 2 (June 2006): 238.
[37] Thomas, 239-42.
[38] Manning, "Constructing a Postcolonial Feminist Ethnography," 91-93.
[39] Ali, "Rethinking Representation," 786-89.

marriage and be with my same-sex partner makes me an insider of the research participant group. Simultaneously, my researcher position and the cultural and linguistic differences from some of my participants make me an outsider of the group. My "halfie" position has its benefits as well as dilemmas, especially when it comes to representation.[40] Being an insider of the group made it easier for me to gain the trust of the participants of my research because I could empathize with them given our similar experiences with homophobia, pressure of marriage, and decisions of migration. My position facilitated my access to and build rapport with the interviewees while simultaneously making me aware of my responsibility to accurately represent them. Most participants discussed their experiences in their hometowns in opposition to the host locations, which often creates a seemingly binary opposition between the two locations; However, as a feminist researcher trained in feminist postcolonial theory and research methods, I could see that these binaries are more imaginary than real. Likewise, the participants' insistence to maintain their relations with their biological families and communities of origin highlighted that they do not see their countries of origin only as oppressive even when they find themselves in unlivable conditions there. Throughout the research and writing, I have been contemplating how to present the reasons and processes of migration in a way that does not reproduce the West and Muslim world in binary oppositions – the West as liberal and queer friendly and the Muslim world as oppressive and homophobic – because both locations have their own issues that queer Muslims try to deal with in order to create queer livable spaces.

[40] Binaya Subedi, "Theorizing a 'Halfie' Researcher's Identity in Transnational Fieldwork," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 19, no. 5 (2006): 574.

Chapter 3: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

As my thesis aims to understand how queer Muslims create queer livable spaces for themselves through educational migration, I have identified five thematic clusters of literature that foreground my research by providing concepts, theories, and background research. First cluster of literature is queer theory which provides me a grounding in the concepts such as heteronormativity, homonormativity, and homonationalism. Even though most these concepts are conceptualized in the context of western societies, particularly the US, they are much relevant to other parts of the world in how gender and sexuality are perceived in relation to marriage and reproduction, and non-binary genders and non-reproductive sexualities are marginalized. In the second set of literature, I examine the concepts such as queer livability, queer space, and politics of in/visibility to develop my framework of queer livable space. These concepts provide the necessary theoretical grounding for my research and support my argument that education (and educational migration) allows queer Muslims to negotiate the expectations from home and host communities to create queer livable spaces.

The third cluster focuses on the research and theories of queer migration and research on asylum practices and policies and their impacts on asylum seekers. This cluster foregrounds my research in the already existing field of queer migration, which my research also extends by exploring a different direction/strategy for queer migration. The fourth section brings together concept of agency and literature on educational migration highlighting that education becomes a source of empowerment and pursuit of higher education abroad is an agential choice of queer migration. The final thematic cluster is the literature on queer diaspora that presents the concepts of diaspora, home, and belonging. The last three sets of literature are useful for

analyzing the empirical data from the interviews to understand the migration decisions of queer Muslims and different aspects of queer livable spaces.

3.1 Heteronormativity, Homonormativity, and Homonationalism

Queer theory provides an understanding of the basic concepts I will be using in my research. Heteronormativity refers to the hegemony of heterosexuality as coherent, natural, and privileged and the assumption that all individuals are and ought to be heterosexual, thus invoking prejudice and violence against non-heterosexual individuals. Michael Warner in his "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet" popularized the concept of heteronormativity in queer theory in relation to power, family ideology, and homophobia claiming that "heteronormativity has a totalizing tendency" that disadvantages the non-reproductive, alternative sexualities.[41] The compulsory heterosexuality and normativity of reproductive marriage forces people to confirm to the sexual norms of society. This normalization of a certain sexuality, as Foucault emphasizes, imposes homogeneity and legibility in order to control and discipline the society,[42] and thus has the power to create the abnormal. Deviation from the norm of heterosexual and reproductive romantic relations is considered abnormal – mentally defective or morally inferior. Therefore, those who deviate from the norms are marginalized, discriminated against, and subjugated to violence by the society and the state.[43] Even though Warner introduces the term in the US context, it is equally relevant in the context of Muslim majority countries from where my research participants pool is drawn from. The societies in these contexts also assume that all individuals are heterosexual, expected to marry (the opposite gender) and reproduce. Heterosexual marriage is the norm and there is little to no space for alternative sexualities and/or gender identities to co-exist freely. It is not only same-sex sexual relations that are

[41] Michael Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," *Social Text*, no. 29 (1991): 8.
[42] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995): 184.
[43] Warner, 9-10.

prohibited and criminalized but also any sexual relations outside of marriage are reproached in most Muslim majority countries. The pressure of conformity to heteronormativity in these countries, just like everywhere else in the world, thus, forces queer Muslims to consider migration, often to the western countries where they may find some space to navigate the expectation of heteronormativity due to the growing acceptance of LGBTQ people.

According to Samuel Allen and Shawn N. Mendez, heteronormativity as an ideology consists of three "interrelated and analytically inseparable binaries: the gender binary, the sexual binary, and the family binary", privileging cisgender men and women, heterosexuality, and nuclear family.[44] However, these categories have started to shift slightly to include previously marginalize identities, such as transgender, homosexual individuals creating new heteronormativity that includes homonormativity. Homonormativity, as conceptualized by Lisa Dugan, is the political assimilation of homosexuality into the neoliberal economy, making possible to be a depoliticized gay without questioning, and rather privileging, heteronormative ideals and institutions, such as marriage, reproduction, and family.[45] Dugan argues that homonormativity "does not contest the dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them."[46] In this homonormative inclusion of lesbians and gays in the heteronormative society, similar kind of hierarchies and distinctions are created within the non-normative groups. For example, same-sex marriage and monogamous relations are prioritized as the "right" kind of same sex relations over the "promiscuous", polygamous, non-marital same-sex sexual relations.[47] Similarly, the issues of class, gender and race are ignored within the queer communities as "divisive" by locating the "unity in the unmarked centrality of

[44] Samuel H. Allen and Shawn N. Mendez, "Hegemonic Heteronormativity: Toward a New Era of Queer Family Theory," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 10, no. 1 (2018): 70.
[45] Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," In *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, by Russ Castronovo and Dana D Nelson (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002).
[46] Dugan, 179.
[47] Dugan, 182.

prosperous white men, whose interests unproblematically define the interests of 'the gay and lesbian community.'"[48]

Dugan's concept of homonormativity is used in much of queer migration research in relation to homonationalism, as homonationalist discourses favor homonormativity because it does not challenge the hegemony of heteronormativity or white supremacy in the society. Jasbir Puar coined the term homonationalism in her foundational work, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, to describe the collusion between US nationalist and queer politics in which LGBTQ rights politics is co-opted as a symbol of the US as a liberal nation in opposition to the racialized others, particularly Muslims. This inclusion of lesbian and gay subjects in the US nationalist project (and of many other countries in the west) has come on the expense (denial) of other racialized minorities who have been constructed as a threat to the LGBTQ friendly nation(s).[49] In her later article, "Rethinking Homonationalism" Puar refines this concept arguing that "homonationalism is rather a facet of modernity…and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality".[50] Puar's work has shaped much of the later work by David Murray, Stefan Vogler, Cheryl Llewellyn, and Rachel A. Lewis in the field of queer migration in relation to asylum policies and practices, construction of queer identity, and the LGBTQ migration crisis in different contexts, such as Canada, the US, the UK, some Western European countries, and Australia. I will discuss this work in the later part of the next section on queer migration.

[48] Dugan, 183.
[49] Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Next Wave (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
[50] Jasbir Puar, "Rethinking Homonationalism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (May 2013): 23.

3.2 Livability and Politics of In/visibility: Towards Queer Livable Space

Queer livability as a concept is central to my thesis as it explains the reasons of queer Muslims to migrate as well as their decision to create a certain kind of life in host locations. The concept, livability, "is constituted – albeit not determined – by a certain lack, by a certain negation of the possibility to live".[51] The constraints and regulations placed on life, of an individual or a community, in this case queer Muslim community, restrict one to live their life fully and achieve a human status making their life unlivable. Livability is, thus, a compromise between these unlivable conditions and the ideal and desired ones in which one can thrive. It is this understanding of livability that frames my thesis.

Judith Butler has developed the concept of livable life in relation to precarious life in many of her works.[52] Butler distinguishes the livable life from the commonly assumed "good life" identified with economic wellbeing, prosperity, and security and instead relates it to morality and biopolitics where one must negotiate power (social and political) to lead a life that has value.[53] The word "value" here is twofold: as in having moral values and being valued as a human, as a person. In the biopolitical understanding of life, Butler argues that a good life is one with values even if those values are against the biopolitical regime that decides whose life is worth living and whose death is worth grieving. However, one cannot decide to live a life that has value "since it turns out that this life is and is not [their] own"[54] because living is a social act, and life is precarious within this social and economic organization of life. As Butler states, "So my own living, my survival, depends on this broader sense of life, one that includes

[51] Adriana Zaharijević and Sanja Milutinović Bojanić, "The Trajectories of the Concept of Life in the Thought of Judith Butler," *Isegoría*, no. 56 (July 5, 2017): 5.
[52] See for example, Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London; New York: Verso, 2004a); Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender,* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004b); Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, (London; New York: Verso, 2009); Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
[53] Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 194-196.
[54] Butler, 200.

organic life, living and sustaining environments, and social networks that affirm and support interdependency".[55] The precariousness of life, where life is treated as "social death" or not a life at all, is what makes it unlivable[56] for queer Muslims because of their non-normative gender and sexualities are treated either non-existent or punishable by law in their countries of origin. The fact that life is lived within the socio-political and economic organizations with norms and structures, not only are social recognition and stability important[57] but also are vulnerability and interdependency for the life to be livable.[58] In this context, a good life is a livable life that is more than just survival of the body[59] and "requires support and enabling conditions in order to be livable."[60] Queer Muslims find themselves in unlivable situations not only because of prevalent queer/trans/homophobia and criminalization of non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities in their countries of origin but also because of Islamophobia, Xenophobia, and homophobia in the countries of migration. Their lives become precarious because of their gender, sexuality, religion, race, and ethnicities often with little to no support and social recognition. The pursuit of higher education and migration become their means to navigate these regimes of power and create a livable space for themselves where they can thrive. Butler's theorization of livable life is quintessential to my conceptualization of queer livable space that queer Muslims create through educational migration.

Butler's concept of livability has been further developed into the concept of "queer livability" by Livable Lives, a joint project of University of Brighton and an LGBT organization Sappho for Equality in Kolkata, India.[61] The project explores what makes lives livable for the marginalized LGBTQ people in the UK and India and has published two reports

[55] Butler, 214.
[56] Butler, 201.
[57] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 8.
[58] Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 218.
[59] Butler, 208.
[60] Butler, *Frames of War*, 21.
[61] See for example, https://liveablelives.org/

and organized multiple events including a two-day conference in 2016. One of the reports, "Understanding Liveability/ies" by Dr. Ranjita Biswas, Dr. Niharika Banerjea, Rukmini Banerjee, Sumita B explores how the concept of livable life plays out in the everyday experiences of LGBTQ identifying persons in Kolkata, India. The research aims to move beyond the discussion of inclusion/exclusion of queer people in the nation and towards understanding how individuals and collective systems can be strengthened to enable and facilitate queer livability.[62] This research highlights a number of themes and issues ranging from self-identification to intimate and familial relationships, from mental health to financial independence, and blending in and being ordinary to strategizing for a better life that demonstrate the experiences of queer people in Kolkata. The authors conclude that there is no consensus on one kind of livability for queer people as different participants define livability and what makes their lives livable differently. They propose moving from a model of livability to a spectrum of livabilities and claim that every queer life is "a resource of understanding livability."[63] Their findings support my own understanding of the lived experiences of the participants in my research and frame my thesis that time and space are integral to livable lives for queer people. The space here is conceptualized not only as a physical space, such as home, workplace, community center, but also in abstract form, as having a space to talk to someone about your life.[64]

Queer livability is tied to queer space and the space, physical, virtual and imagined, is a significant part of livable life. Francesca Stella develops the concept of queer space in relation to the politics of in/visibility in her article, "The Politics of In/Visibility: Carving Out Queer Space in Ul'vanovsk." Examining the general understanding of queer space as a space of

[62] Ranjita Biswas et al., "Understanding Liveability/Ies: A Report of Making Liveable Lives: Rethinking Social Exclusion," (Kolkata: Sappho for Equality, March 26, 2016): 2-3.
[63] Biswas et al., 125.
[64] Biswas et al., 112.

resistance, mostly in urban/metropolitan locations, intertwined with LGBTQ identity (and visibility), Queer politics and neoliberal and leisurely consumption of gay villages and pride events, Stella shifts the focus of queer space from west to east, metropolitan to provincial, and visible to invisible.[65] She draws upon the everyday experiences of tusovka, the local queers, constructing a queer space in the province of Ul'vanovsk and questions the usefulness of queer visibility as well as the territorialized notion of queer space. She argues that most tusovka prefer to remain invisible because "carving out queer space in the city landscape involve[s] striking a difficult balance between the protective shadow of invisibility and the desire to lay claims to public space."[66] This invisibility while claiming public space allows for a livability where tusovka can interact with each other without facing homophobia and violence from the heteronormative society. Her conceptualization of queer space in relation to the politics of in/visibility is useful for understanding the experiences of queer Muslim participants of my research who also dance between visibility and invisibility to create their queer livable spaces where they can be themselves and find queer belonging while also maintaining their familial and communal ties and avoiding homophobia and violence.

Mia Liinason further develops a theoretical framework of queer livability based on this in/visibility paradigm to understand the lives of non-heterosexual migrant women in Nordic countries arguing that "it is more fruitful to understand these enactments [of tacit subjects] as inhabiting a space that is simultaneously in and out of the closet, or neither in nor out, in unstable and sometimes contradictory ways."[67] Her theoretical approach to in/visibility is based on three arguments that visibility and in visibility, first, are ambivalent concepts and shape both positive and negative forms of visibility; second, are not mutually exclusive and co-exist in

[65] Francesca Stella, "The Politics of In/Visibility: Carving Out Queer Space in Ul'yanovsk," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 10 (2012): 1823.
[66] Stella, 1843.
[67] Mia Liinason, "Challenging the Visibility Paradigm: Tracing Ambivalences in Lesbian Migrant Women's Negotiations of Sexual Identity," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019): 2.

complex way; third, have a performative dimension with the agential capacity.[68] Her work challenges the western, heteronormative notion of queerness and the dichotomous public/private and visibility/invisibility paradigms, highlighting the importance of paying attention to context-specific, multiple, and intersecting forms of power. She argues that these women's refusal to comply with the expectations of being out or claiming an identity can be understood as a resistance towards the normative and celebratory discourses of queerness allowing them to value their familial and communal ties. For them, maintaining a healthy relationship with their families is part of livability, especially against the subtle racism and Islamophobia that they often face as migrant women.

Bringing together Butler's conceptualization of livable life, Stella's conceptualization of queer space and Liinason's framework of queer livability, I have developed the concept of queer livable space that queer Muslims create through an agential choice of educational migration. I envision this queer livable space as an alternative space, often in the migrated locations, where queer Muslims can find some harmony in their lives without having to choose between their gender and sexual identity and their relationships with their family, even if it comes at the expense of distance from their family, and where they can navigate, not without compromises, the expectations from family and society in the country of origin as well as in the country of migration on their own terms.

3.3 Queer Migration, Sexual Imaginarium, and Asylum

The anthropologist Kath Weston's article, "Get Thee to the Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration" where she conceptualized the term "the Great Gay Migration of the 1970s and the early 1980s" in relation to the concept of sexual imaginarium can be considered the foundation of the queer migration research and theorization. Weston discusses

[68] Liinason, 4.

how the sexual imaginarium ("There really were people like me" and "I wasn't all alone") of lesbians and gays, developed through books, print and news media, and television and films, lead them to move from small towns to San Francisco Bay Area in search for sexual partners and gay community.[69] Drawing upon Benedict Anderson's term "imagined community," she claims that this "gay imaginary" is not only spatialized but also constructs the identity of the gays and lesbians as "a people" who all belong to an "imagined gay community" that exists in the urban metropolitan.[70] However, the Great Gay Migration did not guarantee identification with the imagined community upon arrival in the city because the gay community had been "gendered, racialized, and classed" leaving out the people at the bottom of hierarchy of gender, race, and class which led to the creation of communities within the gay community.[71] The homonormative environment only valued a certain kinds of gays and gayness privileging the white male gays from certain socioeconomic backgrounds and in monogamous relationships over the poor queers of color.

Even though Weston's work is situated in the late 20th century San Francisco and only discusses the rural to urban internal migration within the USA, it is still foundational in theorizing queer migration, especially in relation to the queer imaginarium. Her work provides grounding for my research as the migration pattern of queer Muslims is somewhat similar, from small towns and cities to the capital cities in their home countries and then towards the gay metropoles in the west. Their sexual imaginary of the LGBTQ friendly west is developed through internet, social media, and movies as well as travel and education, conscious of the divisions within the gay/queer community. Even though this dichotomous construction of queer migration from rural to urban, east to west in search of queer friendly locations has been

[69] Kath Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995).
[70] Weston, 34-35.
[71] Weston, 51.

challenged, Weston's article is still significant in understanding the flow of queer people from the Muslim majority countries to the west. However, it is also notable that this migration is not only one way, from east to west, but back and forth and in multiple directions, which also explains the strategic educational migration of queer Muslims to create queer livable spaces wherever and however it may become possible. Weston's early work demonstrated that the sexual imaginarium is spatialized and embedded in the identity politics, power relations, and intersections of class and race which has become even more articulated in the asylum discourses in the early 21st century.

Political activism around AIDS and gay rights and intellectual engagements with sexuality as a field of study in 1990s "enabled the establishment of immigration provisions for refugee/asylum cases based on sexual orientation."[72] There has been substantial research on asylum policies and practices and their impacts on the asylum seekers in the last two decades. Asylum on the basis of gender and sexuality has become a passage to, at least, imagined safety and freedom of expression for many queer people from the countries in the Global South where non-normative sexualities and gender identities are prosecuted and violated on societal and state levels. However, the asylum granting institutions are homonormative and do not always take into consideration different kinds of non-normative gender and sexual identities, instead force the asylum claimants to perform the homonormative queer identity to be legible and granted asylum. David Murray discusses the construction of "real" and "authentic" queer migrants during the asylum-seeking process in Canada arguing that it is always the decision makers who have the power to name and validate the right way of being queer.[73] The state determines the worthiness of LGBTQ asylum applicants based on "credible" proofs of their membership to the group which leads the applicants to perform their queerness in a way that

[72] Manalansan, "Queer Intersections," 231.
[73] David A.B. Murray, "Real Queer: 'Authentic' LGBT Refugee Claimants and Homonationalism in the Canadian Refugee System," *Anthropologica* 56, no. 1 (2014).

reproduces the hegemonic white, middle-class understanding of gayness/queerness in order to be considered credible.[74] According to Stefan Vogler, an asylum lawyer and researcher, while the adjudication process consolidates and regulates the categories of sexual identities according to the normative (hegemonic white, middle-class) understanding, it can also open spaces for marginalized and unique sexual identities to be recognized in the asylum law as every case is judged individually.[75] Regardless, it is dependent on the judges whether they recognize the unique sexual identities or not in the process of granting asylum. The asylum claimants who can adopt to the normative understanding of the "homosexual" have a greater success than those who present unique identities that do not fit the normative narrative.[76] There is a tension in these asylum practices as only a western model of a particular kind of western centric queerness gets recognized in these asylum cases. The kind of queerness that may not conform to the material reality and lives of the asylum seekers, and often does not allow a Muslim to be queer.

The institution of asylum not only produces gender and sexual identities in certain, often homonormative, ways but also constructs the asylum granting locations in the west as liberal and LGBTQ friendly, and the non-west especially the Muslim world as oppressive. Jasbir Puar, in the postscript of her book Terrorist Assemblages argues that asylum discourses, especially in the times of Trump administration, reinforce racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic narratives about the Muslim world. Even though Muslim homophobia is very real, homosexuality is criminalized in most Muslim majority countries, and queer Muslims often face violence in their countries of origin, asylum discourses give rise to Islamophobia through the narrative that all Muslims are homophobic, intolerant, and dangerous increasing

[74] Murray, 26.
[75] Stefan Vogler, "Legally Queer: The Construction of Sexuality in LGBQ Asylum Claims," *Law & Society Review* 50, no. 4 (2016).
[76] Cheryl Llewellyn, "Homonationalism and Sexual Orientation-Based Asylum Cases in the United States," *Sexualities* 20, no. 5–6 (2016).

the violence against the Muslims within the US.[77] This construction of queer and Muslims as exclusive and opposite to each other through these asylum discourses explains why many queer Muslims resist the idea of seeking asylum in the west and instead choose educational migration. Here educational migration becomes a feasible means of migration for queer Muslims because it allows them to have individual approaches to negotiating their identities for themselves and perhaps never even disclosing their private lives in the process of migration if they want.

Another and an extremely important issue with the asylum as a form of queer migration is also the violence that is inherent in the asylum-seeking process for the queers of color, especially the queer Muslims. Rachel A. Lewis examines legal and administrative forms of violence produced by the current immigration policies and practices, particularly detention and deportation in several countries. She claims that current asylum practices construct the detainable and deportable queer subjects and exposes queer migrants, particularly women and transgender people, to extreme forms of physical and psychological violence during the detention and deportation, and afterwards.[78] In the political asylum process, queers of color not only face difficulties to produce required documents proving their sexual orientation and a "real" threat of prosecution in their home countries while in detention, but are also constructed in the western heteronormative notions of queerness as either "'too gay' and thus 'faking it,' or simply not 'gay enough'", and thus, are often refused asylum and forcefully deported to their countries of origin exposing them to further violence there.[79] These violent practices, she argues, force these queer migrants to avoid the bureaucratic process of asylum seeking and become illegal and undocumented migrants, which again exposes them to further exploitation

[77] Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times, (Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies)* Tenth Anniversary ed. (Duke University Press Books, 2017): 224.
[78] Rachel A. Lewis, "LGBTQ Migration Crises," In *The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises*, by Rachel A. Lewis, edited by Cecilia Menjívar, Marie Ruiz, and Immanuel Ness (Oxford University Press, 2018).
[79] Lewis, 6.

and violence.[80] Her findings that asylum process induces violence inform my assumption that queer Muslims chose educational migration as a more feasible strategy to migrate instead of seeking asylum due to the unlivable conditions asylum exposes them to by rendering them (in)visible and prone to violence.

3.4 Educational Migration, Family Ties, and Agency

Educational Migration is understood as a mobility of people in search of better and higher quality education.[81] Not only is education a source of empowerment, but the migration from home countries/communities for education is an attempt to create more livable conditions. Those queer Muslims who have the option to purse higher education abroad also utilize the opportunity to migrate from their countries of origin not only for a better education but also to create a queer livable space. Richard Taulke-Johnson's research on gay male students' university choices links educational migration to queer migration. Based on interviews with 17 gay undergraduates studying in a UK university, he argues that while the university prestige, availability of desired subjects, and funding/finances influenced their choice of the university, the sexual orientation of the participants was the biggest determinant in their decision to leave home for higher education.[82] The participants' (non-hetero)sexuality influenced their decision to relocate away from their home communities, which are heterosexist and homophobic, towards a location that is more accepting and supportive of non-heterosexual sexualities. Through this decision of moving away from home, the participants hoped not only to escape the heterosexism and homophobia in their home communities but also to engage freely with their sexuality in a more accepting and less judgmental environment.[83] This research

[80] Lewis, 9.
[81] Omokaro Obire, "Educational Migration: Causes, Challenges, and Probable Solutions," *Migrants and Comparative Education* 50/17 (April 9, 2020): 239.
[82] Richard Taulke-Johnson "Queer Decisions? Gay Male Students' University Choices," *Studies in Higher Education* 35, no. 3 (2010).
[83] Taulke-Johnson, 256.

demonstrates that the choice to move away from home for higher education, in the same country or abroad, is not necessarily for the sake of better education only. These choices become even more critical for the queer people, particularly women, from Muslim communities/countries where non-heterosexuality is considered a crime and heteronormative marriage is a compulsion. Queer Muslims' pursuit of higher education in the western countries not only allows them to migrate away from home countries but also enables them to create a livable space for themselves. Through educational migration, they escape, navigate, and/or transgress the gender and sexual norms in the countries of origin while also maintaining their familial and communal ties and a respectable status in their families and communities.

Family ties also play an important role in queer people's decisions to migrate for education and/or employment. Thomas Wimark discusses the importance of family ties in the migration decisions and back and forth migration of Turkish gays and lesbians from hometowns to large cities. Through a life course analysis of his interviews with 15 self-identified gay men and women, Wimark argues that while distance from the family and kinship networks are empowering these Turkish gay men and women to explore their sexual identities, the familial ties are also very strong, because of which many of his participants have and plan to move(d) back and forth from their hometowns to big cities like Istanbul and Izmir to pursue higher education and subsequent employment.[84] Education becomes the empowering route for such process because pursuit of higher education keeps buying them time to delay the heteronormative expectation of marriage as well as allows a better social standing that is usually unavailable to gays and lesbians in Turkish society due to their marginalization.[85] Under these circumstances, "individuals can direct their motivation to their education and

[84] Thomas Wimark, "The Impact of Family Ties on the Mobility Decisions of Gay Men and Lesbians," *Gender, Place & Culture* 23, no. 5 (May 3, 2016).
[85] Wimark, 661.

employment trajectories, as these areas can offer space for independence and freedom,"[86] just as we notice in my research where queer Muslims use the educational opportunities abroad to create a space of independence and freedom from family where they can be queer as they want without compromising the family relationships. The back-and-forth movement from small towns to large cities within Turkey also problematizes the notion of escape from family to live a gay life. Some people also find support from their families if they come out, probably because the Turkish society is slightly more open to LGBTQ people than other Muslim majority countries and has no criminalization laws against homosexuality; however, many gays and lesbians do not think that coming out is necessary and they want to maintain their family ties.[87]

Similarly, a more recent study by Muyuan Luo discuses Chinese gay men's motives of migration and importance of family and home in migration decisions.[88] Through life history interviews of 50 gay men living in Shenzhen, China, he concludes that *jia* (family/home) is an important factor in mobility decisions of these men. "Although most of my informants' migration initially suggests an escape from their natal families, they plan to either live with or live in a place that is not far from their family so that they can enjoy their own private life and at the same time maintaining the harmony within their natal families."[89] Even though the contexts of Wimark's and Luo's research are different, the findings still inform my research as I am also looking at how the queer Muslims try to maintain their relations with their biological families and societies of origin while creating queer livable spaces for themselves through educational and employment opportunities abroad. The migration journeys of my interlocutors are also not linear, from countries of origin to the west, but also back and forth; some of them

[86] Wimark, 669.
[87] Wimark, 668-69.
[88] Muyuan Luo, "Sexuality, Migration and Family: Understanding *Jia* and Its Impact on Chinese Young Gay Men's Migration Motives from a Temporal Perspective," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48, no. 3 (September 17, 2020):
[89] Luo, 587.

move back to their home countries, sometimes in difference cities, or other countries after completing their education. For them, education is this empowering tool that allows them to move around different locations maintaining close (emotional and physical) proximity or distance from their biological families as they deem livable.

Queer Muslims decide how and where to migrate and how to perform, visible or invisible, in and out of the closet, depending on their location and circumstances in order to create their own unique queer livable space. The concept of agency as theorized by Saba Mahmood is at the heart of these decisions. Mahmood conceptualizes agency as the capacity and desire to act in a certain way, regardless of whether this act resists the norms and relations of power or reinforces and redeploys them for personal interests and agenda. She argues that "agential capacity is entailed not only in those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability."[90] She criticizes the liberal secular feminists' political and analytical claims of agency as a resistance and breaking away from norms and suggests separating agency from the political project of emancipation. This separation allows us to identify and understand queer Muslims' choices of when, if, and how to migrate and whether to come out or not and to who as agential actions that help them create their queer livable space. They do not have to come out and claim the queer identity or seek asylum on the basis of this identity for their liberation as queer individuals or to be considered as agents defying heteronormativity. Their capacity and decision to act upon some norms (such as passing as straight or binary gender), without outright subverting or resisting, allows them to navigate some other norms such as marriage and heteronormativity. Though Mahmood's notion of agency is conceptualized in the context of Muslim women's engagement with religion in the piety movement in Egypt, the same understanding of the concept can be applied to Queer

[90] Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 212.

Muslims who use education strategically to migrate in order to escape the marriage and heteronormativity while still maintaining their familial relationships and a respectable social status. As such, this form of agency is multifaceted as they negotiate between societal norms, familial expectations, and their own desires to create queer livable spaces for themselves.

3.5 Diaspora, Home, and Belonging

The research on diaspora and particularly queer and Muslim diaspora provides an understanding about what queer livable space for queer Muslims looks like and what are the important aspects of such space. Diaspora has been an important topic of research by academics to understand the relationship between the "ethno-religious" migrant communities and their "homeland origins" and has been theorizes and retheorized by many scholars in the last few decades.[91] In my research, I am interested in the theorization of queer and Muslim diaspora to help understand the experiences of queer Muslim interlocutors of my research. Conceptualizing Muslim diaspora is complicated because of the heterogeneity of Muslim communities originating from multiple locations around the world who do not identify with a common mythicized territory or culture.[92] The understanding of heterogeneity of Muslim diaspora is critical in my research as the participants originate from different Muslim majority countries, speak many different languages, and have different cultural backgrounds and discussing them together as Muslim diaspora without understanding the differences within the group can be problematic. However, I use the concept of Muslim diaspora as explained by Haideh Moghissi that "both the currency of the term 'Muslim diaspora', and the increasing tendency of these communities to episodically or consistently band together, may have at its core more a political

[91] Kim Knott and Seán McLoughlin, *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*, (London; New York: Zed Books, 2010).
[92] Albrecht et.al., "Editorial: Conceptualising 'Muslim Diaspora'," Journal of Muslims in Europe, 5, no. 1 (May 28, 2016).

than a cultural impulse."[93] She claims that collective diasporic identity and solidarity is often formed as a response to the inhospitable climate in the host locations and given that Muslim migrants often face heightened surveillance, they may identify with this politicized identity of Muslim diaspora. This explains why many queer Muslims networks bring together people from all different Muslim regions under the umbrella of queer Muslims as a group because of the shared politicized identities.

Similarly, queer diaspora is not only heterogenic and political, but also critical of both the home and the host communities, especially the queer Muslim diaspora. In her book, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, Gayatri Gopinath discusses the concept of queer diaspora in relation to nationalism and heterosexuality claiming that queerness is to heterosexuality as diaspora is to nation, an inadequate copy. "The concept of a queer diaspora enables a simultaneous critique of heterosexuality and the nation form while exploding the binary oppositions between nation and diaspora, heterosexuality and homosexuality, original and copy."[94] The queer Muslims in the diaspora also complicate the binary exclusion of queer Muslims from both the Muslim community and the queer community because of their identity as queer and Muslim as these identities are considered mutually exclusive. The sole existence of queer Muslims challenges this notion of mutual exclusivity of the homosexuality and Islam. This understanding of queer diaspora provides an understanding of the queer Muslims migrants in the west who do not fully belong to the multiple groups they identify with, such as their nations, Muslim communities, or queer communities. This directs us to a nuanced understanding of the concepts of home, family, and belonging. Gopinath claims that "the framework of a queer diaspora radically resituates questions of home, dwelling, and

[93] Haideh Moghissi, "Introduction," in *Muslim Diaspora: Gender, Culture and Identity*, (London: Routledge, 2006): xiv.
[94] Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, Perverse Modernities (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 11.

the domestic space"[95] where the home is constantly in the making as domestic, national, and familial. For a queer diasporic subject, as in the case of my research participants, home is not only which "[they] cannot not want" but also which "[they] cannot and would never have"[96] because home for them is not only a place of nostalgia but also of oppression.[97] However, as the queer bodies travel within and away from the space of home, they shift the very meaning of home in this process of movement.[98] The movement of queer Muslims towards the west and back to the Muslim world in an attempt to maintain the familial relations and belonging with freedom of expression change the meaning of home for them. Some of them consider migration as homecoming, others consider the option to return home to their families essential; in all these situations, many of them carry the home within themselves as they move around the world creating a queer livable space.

Family, biological and/or chosen, is important to the creation of queer livable spaces for these queer Muslims. The concept of chosen family has become popular among the queer communities in the last few decades, especially since Kath Weston's anthropological book, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays Kinship*. Through interviews of eighty lesbians and gays and participant observation of gay communities in the San Francesco Bay Area, Weston complicates the concepts of family and kinship commonly assigned to biological relations and claims that lesbians and gay men construct their own notions of kinship and choose their gay families based on love, friendship, and acceptance.[99] She argues that kinship is not fixed on biology because if biological families can reject a lesbian and gay child by choice, it also means that lesbians and gays can also form kinship by choice and "that selectivity became the

[95] Gopinath, 14.
[96] Gopinath, 173.
[97] Gopinath, 186.
[98] Gopinath, 177.
[99] Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship. Between Men--between Women*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

organizing principle of gay families, or that when gay families emerged they were also called families we choose."[100] However, she also claims, the chosen families are not a replacement of (lost) biological families, and many people expressed the desire to maintain ties with biological families while establishing their new families.[101] Weston's conceptualization of chosen family as well as her finding that many people desire to maintain relationships with their biological families help me understand the decisions of many queer Muslims who are similarly trying to maintain their ties with biological families while creating new queer families. They have different expectations from and attachments with both families which shape their decisions of not/coming out, in/visibility, and above all migration because at the heart of it is a queer livable space they are trying to create.

3.6 Conclusion

Through this literature review, I have tried to bring together different concepts, theories, and research that foreground my thesis. Bringing together these thematic clusters of literature helps me develop my theoretical framework of queer livable space and argue that educational migration allows queer Muslims to create a queer livable space and that this space is an alternative as well as resistance to the western notions of queerness and visibility paradigm. In the following chapters, I will draw upon the above-mentioned literature and concepts to extend my analysis of the interviews on which this thesis is based on to understand why queer Muslims decide to migrate and how they create queer livable spaces through educational migration.

[100] Weston, *Families We Choose*, 74.
[101] Weston, 116.

Chapter 4:
Queer Migration: from Unlivability to Livability

In an online interview in September 2020, Aliya, a 31-year-old Jordanian queer woman, shared with me that she had recently left a thriving career in a non-governmental organization working for criminal justice and legal aid in Amman, Jordan to pursue a second master's degree in the Netherlands, by paying fourteen thousand Euros tuition fee plus living expenses. I was not surprised. I had done the same. I also left a thriving career in an international university to pursue this master's program at CEU and opted to cover the partial living expenses in Budapest and Vienna from my savings. As Aliya continued with her life story, I was surprised at the stark similarities of the essence of our life stories regardless of our different family circumstances and the fact that we come from two different countries, Pakistan and Jordan, located in different regions, South Asia and the Middle East. Aliya comes from a socio-economically poor family in a Northern village in Jordan and is the first woman in her whole village to get a higher education and have a career, instead of being married and having children. While her parents supported her early education, she slowly kept pushing the boundaries to pursue further education and a career. She moved out of the village to the capital city, Amman, for work at the age of 21 and supported her family financially including her brothers' and male cousins' education. She also saved up over 20 thousand Euros to pay for her second MA by working three jobs at a time right before leaving for the Netherlands.

Even though she had a thriving career, financial independence, freedom of mobility locally (between her village and Amman) and internationally (for conferences and travel), she decided to leave Jordan and move to the Netherlands through education by paying for it. The question is why. Why did she choose to leave her family and friends, a flourishing career, and financial stability in Jordan to become a student in a western country? The pursuit of higher

education at home and abroad is always considered as a means for better employment prospects and upward class mobility. However, when Aliya already was on the path to upward class mobility with an MA degree and a thriving career, why did she choose to pursue a second master's degree in the Netherlands, and that too by paying thousands of Euros for it? Instead, would not that be a downward social mobility for her? She would deplete her savings and become an Arab Muslim migrant in a western country as she plans to find a job and continue living in the Netherlands on work visa after completing her degree. She is not the only person among the queer Muslim participants of my research who are paying and/or are willing to pay for their education in a western country as a way to migrate there. The question is what motivates their desire to move from their countries of origin to a western country and why education becomes the means to initiating such a move. Poverty or economic prosperity are not the only reasons people migrate from one country to another. Queer Muslims from the Muslim majority countries migrate in order to create a livable space for themselves as they find themselves in unlivable conditions in their countries of origin due to the socio-political marginalization, homo/trans/queer phobias, and harassment and physical violence towards LGBTQ individuals on familial, societal, and national levels as I discussed in the introduction.

4.1 Lived Experiences of Queer Muslims

Even though most of my participants have not faced direct violence or a threat to their life in their countries of origin, their lives have been influenced by the prevalent homophobia, transphobia, harassment, fear of violence and criminalization, and constant pressure of marriage and heteronormativity. All participants of my research, including myself, have faced harassment, homophobia, and transphobia at some point in their lives with different levels of severity and much of this harassment comes from family, friends, and local community in forms of disapproval, marriage pressure, bullying, mental and verbal abuse, and sometimes physical violence. None of the participants live a completely "out and proud" life and most of

them are extremely cautious about their appearance and expression of their gender and sexuality at their family homes and in public places to avoid harassment. All of them have heard homophobic/transphobic comments even when these comments might not be directed at them. They understand that general public, including their family and friends, is not accepting of their non-normative gender and/or sexuality and thus only open up selectively to those they know to be accepting, such as other members of LGBTQ community online and/or offline, or to their immediate family members and close friends if they feel safe with them or feel the need to share this information with them. Ten out of fifteen participants, including myself, have not shared about their non-normative gender or sexuality with their families in order to avoid facing discrimination, harassment, or physical violence from the family members, losing their family or hurting their parents' religious or cultural sentiments in their old age. Only five participants have come out to their family and close friends and three out of the five have faced homophobia and different level of emotional abuse by their immediate family members. The only two participants (Oditi, 23-years-old from Bangladesh and Zoya, 31-years-old from Turkey) who received acceptance from their immediate family upon coming out have also faced harassment, bullying, and fear of violence by the society at large.

All participants who grew up with visible signs of their non-normative gender or sexuality have faced bullying at schools, neighborhoods, and even at their own homes. Three out of the four gay men who participated in this research have shared experiences of being bullied because they showed signs of femininity. Both Bangladeshi gay men, Saeed and Nadeem, have been called "hijra" and "half ladies" derogatorily and made fun of at different occasions due to their feminine attributes. Similarly, both gender non-binary individuals (assigned female at birth) and some of the lesbian women who showed signs of masculinity and dressed in non-traditional, non-feminine clothing and hairstyles faced criticism and bullying at schools and universities by teachers and other students as well as at home by family

members, relatives, and neighbors. For example, Kadir, a 30-year-old, gender non-binary, lesbian/queer person from Bangladesh, was often called "tomboy" by their school and university friends, and "hijra" by the bullies because of their choice to keep short hair and dress "like a boy". Similarly, Oditi, a 23-years-old gender non-binary person, was harassed on streets many times because of their ambiguous gender identity. They emphasize how Dhaka, their hometown, became unlivable for them as "it did not accept me in most of my ways. Every interaction with the city took a toll on me." Homophobia, transphobia, harassment and bullying in public places in addition to criminalization of homosexuality in the countries of origin are defining experiences of many queer Muslims. However, the fear of homophobia and violence, and the constant pressure of marriage from one's own family are the most important factors that living at the family homes become unlivable for queer Muslims shaping their desires and decisions to migrate.

4.1.1 Fear of violence and homophobia

The fear of violence and homophobia is not just due to the assumption that the family will not accept them for who they are, but also because of the early life experiences of such violence and intolerance in the family. Two of the participants shared traumatic experiences of family's violation of privacy and emotional and verbal abuse due to their homophobic attitude, influencing their decision to keep their sexual orientation secretive and the desire to move out of home and their country of origin. Meerab, a 21-years-old lesbian woman from Jordan, faced severe bashing from her parents when they almost found out that she was a lesbian because she was following a lesbian on Instagram. They sat her down and questioned her about her sexuality which she denied realizing the danger in coming out to her parents at the age of 17. She tried to cover up by saying that it was her friend, and she was following her because she wanted to talk to her friend.

> I had a thought that it was a fool proof excuse, 'oh I don't support it, but I don't hate it,' and thought that they'd be okay with it. I told them that, but they were like: 'No, that's not allowed. You are not even supposed to be okay with it. You are not supposed to be friends with them. You are not supposed to talk to them or keep them in your life. If you see a gay person, you should completely shun them out and shame them for it.' They talked about the people of Lot and Islam.

She "cried her eyes out for hours" to convince them that she was not gay. It took her over a year to overcome the trauma from this experience. Meerab grew up in Saudi Arabia in a conservative Muslim family where she is not even allowed to talk to men freely or have a boyfriend. Homosexuality is out of question. Sexuality outside of marriage, particularly of women, is prohibited even though a sexual relationship between two women under the guise of friendship can be easier than a sexual relation between two men or between a man and a woman in Arab/South Asian/Muslim communities. The normality of close and deep female friendships in the society also allows for some alternative space for existence and toleration of homosexuality under the guise of platonic friendships.[102] While this environment allows for same-sex relationships among women to flourish secretively, it does not guarantee the acceptance. Even though Meerab was able to have a sexual relationship with her female partner in her home introducing her as her "best friend" to her parents, she also realized that she will have to leave home and her country to be able to fully explore and express her sexuality.

Sumaira, a 31-years-old lesbian woman from Bangladesh, also faced emotional abuse and "corrective" teaching from her family during her high school years when she acknowledged her love for a female friend and her desire to marry her to her mother. Her elder brother and mother kept an eye on her from then onward, she was given religious education, and her mobility beyond school (that too escorted by an elder sibling) was restricted for few months until they could assure that she was "corrected." She made a genuine effort to change her attitude and her feelings towards her friend, started believing that it was a sin, and felt

[102] Shuchi Karim, "Living Sexualities: Negotiating Heteronormativity in Middle Class Bangladesh," ISS Phd Theses. (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2012).

ashamed about it. Regardless of trying so hard, it took her over 5 years to overcome her feelings for this friend. When she fell in love again with a university friend in her junior year of college and as she tried to unlearn the internalized homophobia, she decided to keep it a secret from her family and friends, moving out of home to a different city for work first, and then moving to another country to be with her partner.

Similarly, Tonima, a 29-years-old butch lesbian and gender fluid person from Bangladesh, was cast out from extended family and faced much bashing because of her decision to move to the capital city for work in the field of gender and sexuality. Tonima grew up in a small town in a middle-class family and suffered gender-based violence within her family and society. She had wanted to leave home from an early age and make her own independent life, something that was not common for women around her in her community. She left home after high school to attend an international university for women in Chittagong on scholarship and moved to Dhaka after graduation to work with an LGBTQ organization on gender and sexuality issues. Even though she had some extended family in Dhaka, she received no support or comfort from them in finding accommodation or settling in the capital city as a single woman due to her association with the LGBTQ and feminist organizations. "When I moved to Dhaka, all of my uncles and aunts have apartments that are empty, furnished and empty, in Dhaka. But I couldn't find a house because [landlords] didn't want to rent a house to an unmarried girl. Nobody, none of my uncles or aunts even offered to help me find a house." Her extended family did not help because they did not want to associate with her as her activist work was gaining attention by media, and she was considered to be bringing defame to the family. Another instance that confirmed this to her was her uncle's consistent refusal to let her visit him and his family:

> I called my uncle and asked him, can I come over to your house for few days, I am missing home. He said, 'no, not now. We are busy, blablabla. Come later.' I said, 'ok'

> but that later never came. … So when I came [to Myanmar], he told my aunt that he was worried that if we meet and have a conversation, he gets angry, then how could he meet me. What would people think?

Even though she never shared about her gender identity and sexual orientation with any family members or friends explicitly, nor on any social media platform, but her activism on the issues of gender and sexuality was enough for her to face discrimination and disapproval within her (extended) family and society which made her life in Dhaka unlivable. She did not want to be held back by the family disapproval and mistreatment for her work, so she decided to leave the country to pursue an MA in the Netherlands on scholarships to win her independence and freedom from the family.

4.1.2 Experiences of coming out to family: Facing homophobia

While most participants have preferred to keep their sexual orientation secret from their family, particularly parents, some have decided to open up either with the hope of acceptance or to stop the marriage talk. Their experiences of coming out range from reactions of extreme homophobia and emotional violence to total acceptance depending on their social positioning, gender, age, education, financial in/dependence, and their physical location while coming out. Rabia, a 27-years-old lesbian woman from Egypt, started exploring and accepting her sexuality as an undergrad student at a residential international university in a different city than her parental home. She came out to her parents in her junior year of college as what she describes as "dissociative rage" to their treatment of her. She describes her coming out experience and the aftermath of it very strange and unpleasant:

> After that they pretended that I didn't say anything about [my sexuality] unless we were in a really bad fight, and they were really mad. 'Oh, we've never really said this, but you are a very ungrateful daughter, and bla bla bla.' That was later kind of used against me as a weapon but other than that they'd just ignore the whole coming out thing as if it didn't happen. … I moved out because I couldn't deal with them. I lived with my parents for a year after I graduated from [university] because I didn't have a job and I was home. You know girls just can't just move out of their parent's home on their own. … That was horrible and traumatic. My parents were horrible the whole time. It really

> sucked, and I couldn't continue living like that. So I applied to grad schools. … I knew that the only path I could take as an Arab woman was to get married to a dude and become a wife and a mother. And my parents pushed that on me really hard. They really pressured me to marry someone, find a man and marry him. That wasn't the life that I wanted for myself. So I resisted and I rebelled and I tried to get out of there and eventually I was like, my only way out was to get out of the country, to move very far away from my parents to live my own life.

Rabia's parents' ignorance of her sexuality and pressurizing her for marriage with a man continuously even after she had come out to them as a lesbian demonstrate the extreme level of emotional and verbal abuse and homophobia she had to face by her own family members. Even though her younger sisters were accepting of her sexuality and supported her, her parents', especially mother's, attitude made it unbearable for her to live with her family. As an Arab woman, pursuing a master's degree away from home was her only way out of this family abuse so she could create a livable space for herself where she can be herself as she wants and is also able to support herself financially. Given her previous educational background and her interest in creative writing, an MFA degree in the US was her best option. After completing her degree, she stayed on in the US and decided to seek an asylum in order to avoid the repetition of the same familial abuse and the constant marriage pressure. Her asylum application was successful owing to the abuse from her parents besides the possibility of legal prosecution in Egypt for being a lesbian.

Saeed, a 32-year-old gay man from Bangladesh, did not face homophobia and harassment from his family with the same intensity. He first came out to his sister in 2011 when he returned from a year-long exchange program in the US. As an educated liberal young woman, she accepted and supported him, which encouraged him to come out to some of his close friends and cousins, whom he knew will be understanding and accepting. However, his coming out to his mother in 2017, did not go very well. He decided to come out to his mother only after he met his current husband, Liam, in the US during a 4-month community leadership training program in 2016 and fell in love with him.

> She was very upset and worried. She didn't understand. She thought it was due to something she did wrong. But overall, it was not a terrible conversation. She did not throw me out of the house. She wasn't melodramatic and all. I think she is still processing it. I do not rub it in her face. She knows we are together; we live together.

Saeed's experience of coming out is substantially different from Rabia's because of their gender and social positioning within their own unique contexts. Rabia, a female and oldest daughter, grew up in a conservative Egyptian family in Sharjah, UAE with her mother, stepfather, three sisters, and a brother and came out to her parents during an argument with them at the age of 21 while she was still dependent on them. Saeed, on the other hand, is a man, and youngest and only son of his parents, grew up in a liberal, educated, upper middle-class family in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and came out to his mother at the age of 29. It is his gender, age, and his privileged social positioning within the family and society as a man and his higher education and employment even though he was also still living with his mother at their family home. Saeed's privileged social position as a man also becomes clearer when compared to Kadir, a gender non-binary individual from Bangladesh.

Kadir also comes from an upper middle-class family in Chittagong, Bangladesh, with well-educated and professional parents and elder sisters. They were assigned female at birth which put them under an immense pressure to get married immediately after they graduated with a BA and were employed. They first moved away from home to pursue an MA in Sweden, completed their degree, secured a job and work permit, and only then decided to come out to their elder sisters and mother about their sexual orientation. While two of their sisters were accepting and supportive, the eldest sister's and mother's reactions were homophobic. "This is haram in Islam. You are going to go to hell," was the first sentence that came out of their sister's mouth. Their mother was in such a shock and denial that she could not even bring herself to say the word homosexual or lesbian and rather said "have you become THAT after moving to Sweden?" However, both their mother (a professor) and sister (a doctor) came along

slowly through dialogue and conversation, not necessarily fully accepting their sexual orientation, but rather accepting their decision to be whoever they want to be and be with whoever they want to be with. This coming out was only possible for Kadir due to the distance, financial independence, and sense of safety that being in Sweden provided them. While this coming out has suspended the pressure of heterosexual marriage on Kadir, it has not necessarily resolved their concerns for their safety and security. Kadir has not visited Bangladesh since they moved to Sweden in 2014 and do not plan to return until they have Swedish passport to ensure their safe return. This shows that even though they care about their family and want them to know, acknowledge, and understand their life, they do not trust their family and society in Bangladesh with their safety and security because of their non-normative gender and sexuality and thus do not want to risk their life by visiting the family in Bangladesh.

4.1.3 The pressure of marriage and heteronormativity

The constant pressure for marriage by the family and overall society is one of the biggest factors influencing the decision of migration for the queer Muslims, particularly women and gender non-binary individuals. While not everyone faces the marriage pressure with same intensity and frequency, this pressure increases significantly with age and is much higher on (biological) women than on men. Nine participants (2 men, 5 women, and 2 gender non-binary/fluid persons who were assigned female at birth), age 25-31, have faced immense pressure from their family to get married, four participants (1 man, 2 women and 1 gender non-binary), age 21-24, have not yet received the pressure for marriage but know that their families expect them to marry after a certain age and completion of certain level of education. Marriage normativity puts many LGBTQ individuals in an unresolvable situation, especially women. As Rabia mentioned that she was constantly pressurized by her parents to find a man and marry even after she came out to them about her sexuality. Haniya, a 29-years-old lesbian woman from Jordan, almost pursued a marriage proposal and got engaged as she could not find an

excuse after she had completed her engineering degree and started working. Her female partner of four years decided to leave her for traditional marriage which left her distressed and helpless as she could not share this information with anyone in her family or friends. She went to a psychologist to process her emotions and was told that she was committing a sin by loving a girl, and she should instead accept the proposal her parents have presented and get married to a man. She got engaged but could not bring herself to like her fiancé and decided to break the engagement as she made plans to leave her home. "I spent more than six months of my life just crying and depressed because of one of the stupid psychiatrists I have ever seen." She recalls the six months of her engagement the most traumatic time of her life as she was extremely unhappy and confused until she met her current partner and they both decided to leave the country. Even though this "pressure does not always feel harsh,"[103] it becomes unlivable over time.

Even though there is this constant nudging to get married by the parents and family, none of my participants feel that they will be forced into marriage. All of them have developed strategies to deal with the marriage pressure from their parents, whether it is by meeting and talking to the prospective match, or by listening to their parents talk about their concerns for marriage, or by fighting with their parents. For example, Tonima has found a middle ground to deal with the marriage pressure from her parents where she makes some efforts to show her parents even though she knows her answer to a proposal from the beginning.

> My father will not talk to me straight about it. [My parents] know my stand. But my mother would be like, if they find someone they like, she'd tell me 'okay, just have a conversation. If you don't like, we will not move forward. But you should at least talk to the person.' And it doesn't matter how long I talk to the person, even if I talk to the person for ten minutes and I say no, it's a no. They will not force me for anything. My father does get hysteric about it, talks very aggressively with my uncles and my aunts, but never directly towards me.

[103] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 49.

Similarly, Aliya laughed when I asked if her parents have ever brought up the issue of her marriage and how she deals with it:

> Oh my god! Holy shit! That's the story of my life! Oh my God, do you have any idea how many men I met at my parents' house because they wanted me to get married? And every time I try to find a way to get out of it, the next guy would be impossible for me to say no to, you know. [laughingly] He'd check, like, all the boxes that my parents wanted. For example, one guy was dentist, and to an Indian mom, you know, he is a doctor. That's it. You can't say no. [laugh] So there is all this stuff. I remember one time I was telling my mom that I wanted to meet someone who's not Arab because I wanted to find a reason to say no. Me and my mom used to get into so many fights over this. I used to tell her, 'just fucking leave me alone. You made your choices. You converted from a Saraswathi Brahmin to Muslim and married a man that you loved. You did what you wanted to do. Now let me make my choices.'

Talking about marriage and considering each proposal even for a short while takes a lot of mental energy and time; however, most participants, especially those who are not out to their parents, continue to do that instead of outright rejecting the idea of marriage, sometimes in order to buy time and other times to make their parents happy. I have also considered some proposals for the sake of just making my father happy. But mostly, I have been able to avoid the marriage by staying abroad and expressing my passion for pursuing higher education and a career which is also what most participants are doing. Migration and distance from family allow mental and physical space to navigate this constant pressure of marriage without causing a rupture in relationship with parents as Aliya nicely expressed.

> I am into having a peaceful relationship with my parents who are in their sixties. I will never change them; they are never going to change. … They are people, and they are contextual. They live in a certain time and place, and they have their own realities. They have their own challenges, and they also ask themselves existential questions. When we don't choose our parents, they don't choose us either. We need to also acknowledge that. … So one of the reasons why I moved out of the country is to be less under that pressure and for them to be less under that pressure, you know. I mean I know that they love me, and they love to see me but when I'm in their face every weekend, they are reminded of the fact that I am not like all my cousins and that hurts them.

Moving away from home makes it easier for her to handle the marriage pressure on herself and her parents without having to come out to them as a lesbian as it is not possible to change her parents without causing an initial rupture in the relationship. While migration decreases the

marriage pressure and makes it easier to navigate it, the expectation of marriage never dissolves. Sumaira, Rabia, and Malik shared that their parents talk about the issue of their marriage every single time they are on call with their family back home.

Only two participants, (Saeed, a 33-year-old gay man from Bangladesh and Zoya, a 31-year-old bisexual woman from Turkey) have not felt the pressure of marriage from their families. Saeed's parents, both educated and professional, emphasized on the importance of higher education and career more than marriage for both him and his elder sister, who also got married at the age of 27, which is later than the average expected age of marriage for Bangladeshi women. Besides that, his gender and pursuit of higher education afforded him to delay the conversation of marriage until he came out to his mother as gay which dissolved the expectation of him to marry a woman altogether. On the other hand, even though Zoya is a woman, she has also not been pressurized to consider marrying because it is not uncommon for women in Turkey to pursue higher education and career before deciding to marry. Even though she did not receive any pressure for marriage from her family, as some of her cousins do because they do not pursue higher education or a career, she was always aware of the expectation and hope of her parents that someday she will marry a man (given that she is bisexual). Her relationship with her current male partner and their engagement is also probably the reason that the family does not feel the need to pressurize her for a heterosexual marriage.

4.1.4 Being with same-sex partners

Another important factor for one third of the participants to migrate from their countries of origin through education is to be with their same-sex partners and four out of five of them are paying for their education, fully to partially. For example, the main reason for Malik, a 29-years-old gay Egyptian man, to get admission in a graduate school in the UK was to follow his Hungarian partner who was moving to the UK for graduate studies. Malik and his partner,

David, met in 2015 in the UAE where they both were working, fell in love, and have been together since then. When David got admission into a graduate program in a university in London in 2018, Malik also decided to move with him and the only feasible option for him to move was through education even if he had to pay for it. Malik and David got married soon after they arrived in the UK in 2019 so Malik could stay on the spouse visa after completing his degree. Similarly, Sumaira also followed her partner to Budapest on a student visa because her only option to be with her partner was to enroll herself into a graduate program in the same location as her partner. Saeed also decided to pursue his PhD in the USA because his partner was based in Seattle and Saeed wanted to join him there besides pursuing his higher education.

4.2 Conclusion: Migration for Livability

Gender and sexuality become the major force in the desire and decision of queer Muslims to migrate from their countries of origin to western countries to create a queer livable space. They see migration as the best option to maintain their family ties from a distance while being able to express their gender and sexuality freely in the migrated country. As Saba, a 23-years-old Moroccan lesbian woman, accurately describes it:

> Being away is very important for me to keep a good relationship with [my mom] because, it's very difficult balance for me to live my life the way I want to live and maintain a good relationship with her. The only compromise I found is to be abroad because then I can live the way I wanna live, and when I go back home, I can be the daughter she expects me to be.

For Saba, it is important to be a good daughter to her mother without giving up her own desired life as a lesbian. The migration allows her to balance these two equally important parts of her life without giving up one because of the other. Aliya expressed the same sentiments when she said, "I am into having a peaceful relationship with my parents who are in their sixties." Migrating and moving away from parents makes it possible to maintain a peaceful relationship with them an important aspect of their livability.

Pursuit of higher education in the west, thus, becomes the main tool to initiate this migration process, as I will further elaborate in the next chapter. There is a lot more to these queer Muslims decision to pursue education as a strategy to migrate to a western country than simply the western education or the expected subsequent economic prosperity. The decision to pursue higher education abroad is more than just an escape from marriage, or just the higher education. It is the desire to create a livable space for themselves in the migrated country, whether by exploring and expressing their gender and sexuality freely, or being with a partner, or escaping the physical and emotional violence or marriage pressure in the countries of origin, while maintaining a good relationship with the family as well as having a respectable job and a prosperous life.

Chapter 5: Education, Agency, Livability

In this chapter, I will discuss why pursuit of higher education becomes a strategic means to initiate the migration process for queer Muslims who find the circumstances in their countries of origin unlivable. Queer Muslims use educational opportunities strategically to initiate the migration process because it opens up other options such as further education, employment and work permit, permanent residency, marriage and partnership, and asylum. While other immigration options such as work permit, family reunification visa, and permanent residence are desirable options besides and after the pursuit of education, asylum is only considered as the last resort due to the complicated, long, and violent process and the implications of the refugee status. Migration through education, on the other hand, brings social, political, and sexual respect for these migrants both in their countries of origin and the countries of migration making their life more livable.

5.1 Initiating Migration through Pursuit of Higher Education Abroad

Pursuing higher education abroad, mostly in the west, is considered the easiest, most affordable, most promising method to initiate the migration process. All participants have sought opportunities of higher education abroad as a way to leave their countries of origin because they were (becoming) unlivable for them due to their non-normative gender and sexuality, as discussed in the previous chapter. Being able to pursue higher education abroad means that participants come from a certain socio-economic class that makes it feasible for them to seek, apply for, and utilize these educational opportunities. All participants come from families where education is given a huge importance for personal and professional growth. Some participants come from upper middle-class families with strong financial backgrounds where both parents work and earn enough to send their children to international or English

medium schools which prepares them for higher education abroad. Those whose parents did not have much financial means were able to utilize the necessary social contacts such as teachers, parents' colleagues, and other family members and friends to seek resources such as information and scholarships to pursue undergraduate education and some employment in their home countries before moving abroad for graduate level education such as a master's degree, mostly on scholarships. Regardless of the socio-economic situation of the family, all participants and their families view international education as more prestigious and more employable, thus, more desirable. This prestige and empowering attribute attached to education in general, and foreign (and western) education in particular, make it possible for the queer Muslims to explore this option above others to initiate the migration process and create a livable space.

5.1.1 Ability to leave home as an unmarried woman and delay marriage

The social and political respectability higher education brings is one of the most important factors for queer Muslim women to seek educational opportunities abroad. It not only allows them to delay marriage but also provides a reasonable excuse to leave home unmarried. Many female participants mentioned these reasons in their interviews. For example, Rabia used the pursuit of higher education as an excuse to postpone the talk of her marriage, as she expressed: "Part of why I decided to go for a master's was like, well, I'm going to be in school for a couple more years, I don't have time to get married, I don't have time to meet anyone, I want to focus on my education right now." I have used the same excuse many times with my father who mentions about my marriage in every single conversation we have, and I tell him every time that I do not have time for marriage right now as I am studying. I do not want to be distracted by the search for a husband right now. This often brings the marriage conversation to a conclusion, at least for the time being. This excuse is acceptable because of

the prestige of the higher education and the future possibilities such education holds. As Aliya puts it nicely:

> Education, at least, is always seen as something a little bit more prestigious than, you know. [My parents] are like, fine, okay, if she's not going to get married, at least she's pursuing more education. And that's fine. That was the case for me, for example, for my masters. Like they wanted me actually to do a PhD, first. But … I wanted to do another master's that will allow me to get a better career, and they were okay with that.

Women are expected to be married by a certain age, usually mid to late 20s, in South Asia and Middle East, and if they are not married by then, it is usually considered a matter of concern and shame for the family and for the woman especially.[104] So, in case a woman is pursuing higher education, it restores the respect of the family in the society as higher education can be seen as a justification of why she is not married yet, while also providing the women some "breathing space" and distance to explore her sexuality.[105] In situations like Aliya's and many other queer women's who have been trying to find excuses to not marry, higher education comes to rescue. Parents also prefer that their daughter is at least getting higher education if she is not getting married, and in Aliya's case her parents even suggested her to pursue a PhD instead of a master's degree. Even though education might not completely dissolve the marriage pressure on these queer women, it decreases the pressure and buys them time by being away from heteronormative family and society, which is more livable for these women then the extreme pressure of marriage while living at home with parents.

Another important point that was highlighted by Tonima and Meerab was that it is not always possible for unmarried women to leave the family home and relocate to another country without a worthy purpose, such as higher education or a respectable job.

> For people like us, we cannot leave our houses and countries for a job abroad, if it is not a blue-collar job. If we want to have a quality life abroad, then education is a must. First education, it opens gateways to citizenship and foreign work experiences. I don't

[104] See for example, Karim, "Living Sexualities,"110; and Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent," 218-219.
[105] Karim, 124.

> think if I haven't done my master's [abroad], I would have the confidence to even look into career opportunities abroad. I wouldn't be. I had to gain that confidence within myself and education helps. For middle class family, when their daughter wants to go abroad to study that is more acceptable if they go unmarried than going to just work and live a life.

As Tonima highlights, it is more acceptable for woman to go abroad for higher studies than for anything else. Even to go for employment, education is a prior requirement, and it is the foreign/international education that gives confidence to apply for jobs abroad. It is not uncommon for women from South Asia to go abroad for work, especially as domestic labor in the developed countries.[106] However, this kind of migration and employment is not considered respectable in the middle class and educated families where most of my participants come from. This means that unless it is a respectable job which requires higher education and skills, it is not considered appropriate for young unmarried women to leave their country and the safety of their parents' home. When I applied for my first employment abroad, it was mainly because of my international and foreign education that I felt confident to consider a job opportunity in the UAE. However, only receiving the job offer was not enough for me to leave Pakistan and move to the UAE for work. I also had to satisfy my parents as well as the Pakistani protectorate office that it was a safe and respectable job at a university before I could be allowed to leave the country as a 25-year-old unmarried Pakistani woman. For a 20-year-old Meerab, leaving for education was the only decent excuse and feasible way to migrate to Europe:

> I feel like it would have been a lot harder to migrate to Europe, if it weren't for me studying, you know. Like as a working person, I feel that big of a change would have been really hard for anyone, actually. And then a lot of people just not take that chance. And so, you know, the promise of a better education and a better life in foreign countries, is what motivates people to actually migrate. And especially queer people in general. Using study as an excuse to migrate to find a better life. It's the only excuse that would work with my parents, you know, because I can't be like, oh yeah, I just want to go. Just like that.

[106] "Labour Migration Highlights No. 3," Fact sheet, (June 17, 2015). http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS_384860/lang--en/index.htm.

As Meerab states, it is the desire for a better education and better life that influences people's decisions to migrate, and that was her excuse to her parents to leave the queer unlivable situation in the Saudi Arabia and migrate to first Jordan and then to Germany. She took a gap year between her high school and undergraduate studies to prepare for her studies in Germany by learning German and working part time in Amman, Jordan. She convinced her parents to send her to Germany for her undergraduate education as the overall cost of education in Germany was lower than it was in Jordan. It was this excuse of better and cheaper western education that worked in her favor and her parents allowed her to leave home and migrate to Europe as a student.

5.1.2 Affordability of higher education abroad

The affordability of education, especially due to the availability of scholarships in Europe and North America is another important reason influencing many participants' decision to choose education over other means of migration. Most participants of this research are studying on scholarships. Yaseen chose to come to Budapest because of the scholarship he was offered. Even though the restrictions of leaving home are not the same for men and women in these contexts, the reasons for pursuing higher education in Europe are similar. Yaseen also took a gap year after his high school to work because his family could not afford to send him to college in Jordan. During the gap year, he applied for many scholarships for undergraduate studies in Europe, got accepted for Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship to study in Budapest, and decided to pursue it as it would be better to study in Hungary on scholarship than to study in Jordan and work part time throughout to bear the cost of the education.

> Y: The Hungarian scholarship was very, 'please come for us'. Everything was prepared for me. Visa is for free, the accommodation is for free, they give me stipend, and there is no tuition fees. So it was, like, very easy. So I decided that I am gonna take it, even though many people advised me to not go here, because you know how the country is towards foreigners and towards gay people. …

> AN: So what you told me about not wanting to stay in Jordan and rather applying outside of Jordan, was it also because you identified as gay?
>
> Y: before that gap year I didn't know anyone from [queer] community. I was a lone wolf, I guess, loner. And there was a community. In that gap year, like I said, I met so many people. I started going to parties, gay parties, queer parties. In Jordan, there are gay districts I guess, where you can dress like a gay person. There are a few gay bars, or friendly spots. But yeah, the country does not have homophobic laws, but people are still petty homophobic. So, for example, a policeman can stop you but he can't charge you for being gay. Maybe if he was homophobic himself, he would abuse his authority and detain you for being promiscuous, for example. So yeah, in Jordan, [queer people] are generally nice. It's a minority, it's a small community. After some point, you really know everyone. When you meet someone, that someone knows someone you know, and that someone knows someone you know. It's a very small community. And for me, that kind of was very choking. I didn't like that.

The biggest motivation for Yaseen to pursue higher education abroad was clearly the scholarship that Hungarian government offered. So even after he learnt about the prevalent homophobia in Hungary, he decided to come here for studies because he also wanted to leave Jordan, and this was his best opportunity at that moment. For Yaseen, the struggle was not necessarily the inability to leave home as young and unmarried person, as it was for most female participants, but the affordability of education in Jordan. The availability of scholarship further influenced his decision to come to Europe for higher education (and to explore his sexuality and gay lifestyle) because, ultimately, it is the end value of education for employability and livable space that is at the heart of these decisions for migration. Similarly, Oditi mentioned that they had also only applied for European universities and programs taught in English and with funding opportunities. "So I applied to the GEMMA program and this other place in Prague, but I didn't get enough funding, so [my current] university was the one place that I was able to afford, comparatively." The biggest factor for them to come to Budapest for studies was the scholarship they were offered from their current university.

5.1.3 Difficulty of the immigration process

Immigration process for most of the western countries is very difficult, especially for people holding passport from Middle East and South Asia, and student visa becomes the only

way of entry. Malik and Haniya shared their experiences of trying other ways. Malik wanted to move to the UK with his partner David, a Hungarian citizen, who was moving to the UK to pursue his MA. Initially they decided to register their relationship as civil partnership in Hungary which could open the option for Malik to join David to UK as a partner. However, the procedure for the civil partnership was arduous with many documents that had to be collected from Egypt given Malik's citizenship. Even after spending 6 months in collecting these documents, they could not process the civil partnership in Hungary because Malik could not travel to Hungary due to some visa related issue.

> To be honest, as an Egyptian, my only solution was to go for education because I didn't have any other means that I could travel to other countries and be entertained in those other countries. I didn't have proof as being in long term relationship other than photos. I'm not out so there were no family members to back that or friends. We were in a non-gay-friendly country, and it was extremely difficult to prove anything. We didn't have a house on our names for rent or leasing agreement or utility bills. I mean these are all the proofs that probably the UK was going to say 'okay, we understand that you can't marry, but these are proofs, right? Where are these documents?' … The only way for me, once again because I'm Egyptian national, to leave was to go on education visa, student visa. David already had got the acceptance in London. So I was like, tirelessly searching for options in London. I got a couple of rejections. And then I was like, oh, what do I do? And then I decided, my sister actually helped me as one of her patients was from a student outreach company. I reached out to her, and she said, 'Oh, don't worry, I'll get you in. Just tell me what you want, what you're looking for. Send me an email with your documents.' I sent her everything. Then, I think within a month and a half or so she got me an acceptance in my current university, which I was very happy for. And it wasn't a waste of 3000 dirhams paid to her company. And there were a lot of communication issues. But story short, it got me out. I got the visa.

Malik's story elaborates that migration through educational opportunities was the best option for Malik to initiate his migration journey to the UK to join his partner, as other routes he considered failed miserably. Educational migration is considered to be the easiest option because it allows the queer Muslims to leave their countries of origin without raising suspicion of their families about their non-normative gender and sexuality as well as allows them entry into the western countries without being considered as a burden to the host location, especially if one is paying for their education as in the case of Malik.

Haniya, who is living in the UAE with her partner and working as a civil engineer in a construction company, had been looking into the option of permanent residency to Canada as a skilled migrant with little success at the time of the interview. She and her current partner are both Jordanian and had been living together in the UAE for about four years. They cannot apply for the Canadian Express Entry program for permanent residence as a couple from the UAE, even though Canada accepts same-sex partners' applications for skilled migration. She consulted an immigration agency for help, and they told her that it is not possible for them to apply as a same-sex couple from the UAE. They can submit separate application, which would mean that they may be sent to different provinces, and once they are both in Canada, they can request to be united by telling their story to the immigration office. Haniya and her partner are not sure if this arrangement will work for them as Haniya is older in age and gets lesser scores in her application than her partner which means that she might not get invited to apply for the permanent residency. By applying as a couple, they could compensate for each other's weaknesses and help each other in getting the approval as a couple, which does not seem possible for them from the UAE due to the country's laws against same-sex relationships.

These issues demonstrate how difficult the immigration system is and why education becomes the means to initiate the migration process because of its temporariness. Securing admissions (and scholarships) in international universities abroad is also not easy because of the highly competitive application process for MA and PhD programs in most universities around the world. However, when it comes to student visa, it is probably the easiest to get because of the fact that international students, especially those who pay for their education, are considered asset to the host country as they bring income to the country and can also become a skilled workforce with their education if they end up staying in the host country.[107]

[107] Valery V. Grebennikov, et al., "Educational Migration of International Students: Axiological Aspects of the Educational Process," *International Electronic Journal of Mathematics Education 2016,* 11 no.7 (2016).

5.1.4 Employability and settlement prospects

The hope of better employment opportunities abroad and other settlement options is another important reason for queer Muslims to pursue higher education abroad instead of seeking other migration routes. Even though educational migration is temporary, it helps with more long term and more permanent options such as employment, permanent residency and even asylum. All participants believe that higher education abroad opens more employment opportunities leading to a more permanent migration. Five participants (Rabia, Kadir, Malik, Tonima, and Haniya) who had already finished their degrees by the time of the interviews were able to find employment either in the same country where they finished their education or in another foreign country. Rabia, Kadir, and Malik have found employment in the same countries where they studied, while Tonima and Haniya moved to another country to work. All participants have had different journeys to find a long-term migration solution, but the first move through education has been foundational for everyone. For example, Kadir went to Sweden to do an MA, found a job after completing their degree which sponsored their work visa. After 7 years in Sweden (2 years on student visa and 5 years on work visa), they applied for the permanent residency in Sweden and received an approval in November 2021. On the other hand, Malik went to the UK for one-year MA following his partner, got married to his partner in the same year, and was able to extend his stay in the UK for another five years on family reunification visa, and found a job few months after completing his degree. Rabia was able to extend her F1 visa to the USA for job search after completing her MFA, but when she could not find a job soon after graduation, she decided to apply for asylum. In a year, she got asylum as well as a job in the US. Haniya and Tonima found jobs in the UAE and Myanmar respectively after completing their degrees and were working there at the time of the interviews.

Those who were currently studying abroad in 2020 were hopeful that they will be able to figure something out after graduation. Some of them (Saeed and Zoya) had already taken

steps to settle in host locations through marriage to their partners, while some others were hoping to either continue to further education such as MA or PhD or find a job. These options become possible mainly because of the foreign education and the initial migration that this education abroad allows. Aliya for example had already started exploring her options for work even before she moved to the Netherlands for her MA.

> I tried to do a few interviews for jobs before I came here. I tried to network with a few organizations that I can work for. Actually, one of them offered me a job but their HR did not allow me to work because I didn't have a valid EU visa that allows me to work within EU. So it was more so that kind of technicality. And that's why I did this Master's because I met an Egyptian person in one of these organizations who told me this is what he did, 'I did this master's program, and it allows you one year to look for a job after you're done with a master's and if you can, if you find the job that will continue to renew your work permits on a yearly basis, you can just be here for as long as you have work.' … I mean, currently to be honest, for the first time in my life, I do not have a long-term plan. Right now, I have maybe an idea of what I want to do, but I'm also approaching it with a lot of curiosity and not expectations. I'll try to figure out ways in which I can explore myself a little bit more and what I want to do now that I have space to choose without feeling unsafe. And I want to see where that goes. I don't really know what I will end up doing you know, two or three years from now, or five or ten years from now. But for now, at least, my plan is to focus on my studies, get good grades, try to find a job, and then see what happens. If I give myself three to four years of space to be away from Jordan, then maybe I'll be able to figure that out.

Aliya's first master's degree and years of work experience in the field of criminal advocacy in Jordan puts her at an advantage to work with community organizations in the Netherlands even before her graduation. She has been proactively seeking such opportunities and it seems very likely that she will be able to find work soon. Her words show optimism that she'll be able to figure out not only because of her education and work experience but also because she has come to know that there are others who have done something similar, used educational opportunities as a strategy for migration, and that it is possible. Meerab's comment also shows similar hope even though she was only starting her bachelor's degree at the time of interview.

> Going away for study is just like, you know, you finish and then they want you. They want to employ you because you studied in their university, especially here in Germany. You learn their language and you study in their language, and they would want to employ you right away because your education here is a lot better than, they would employ someone who has studied here in Germany than someone who studied in another country, you know.

Aliya and Meerab's statements demonstrate the empowering aspect of education. Higher education is often linked to women's empowerment and agency. Queer Muslims understand the empowering potential of higher education, especially in the west, and believe that with their education they can secure desired employment opportunities in the west and have the freedom to move between their countries of origin and the countries of migration more freely creating queer livable spaces for themselves.

5.2 Asylum: "not for me"

Many western countries offer asylum on the basis on non-normative gender and sexuality and there has been substantial research on asylum policies and practices as a method of queer migration. As a queer Muslim woman in relationship with another queer Muslim woman, my partner and I have been recommended many times in the last few years to seek asylum due to our sexual orientation and impossibility to make a life together in either of our countries of origin. However, as we explored the option, we realized that asylum was not something we wanted to seek because we did not find the process and the aftermath very livable for us. Therefore, in my interviews I asked all my participants if they had considered asylum as an option and the answers were not surprising for me. All participants, except Rabia who had already been granted an asylum in the USA at the time of our interview, expressed that asylum was not an option for them for several reasons highlighted below.

5.2.1 Someone else deserve more

Many participants believed that there were other people who deserved asylum more than themselves because of their circumstances. They believed it because their lives are not as threatened because they are not out to their families or societies or have found some acceptance, and due to their education, they have many opportunities that others may not have. For example, Meerab expressed:

> I don't think I would ever apply for asylum because I'm already privileged enough to be studying here [in Germany]. And I know that I'll be doing my masters and then I will be working. And then by the time, like you know, in a few years, I will be able to apply for citizenship. And so, I feel like just going through the whole asylum thing, I feel like, I feel like other people deserve more than me, asylum status, because people are not as privileged as I am.

Haniya expressed similarly:

> AN: Have you ever thought of asylum as an option? Have you ever heard of asylum, like on the basis of one's sexuality?
>
> H: I've heard of asylum because of the Syrian refugee stories, you know. The people who have been in damage because their lives were damaged because of the war, I think it's more important for those people to do the asylum. I'm not saying that see, because for me as Haniya, my family is fine. I am having some sort of financial support, so I think, the asylum is so much more important for, maybe there are some gay people their lives are at actual risk. So they deserve asylum more than me, because I can somehow support myself. But you know, some people, maybe they cannot. So I don't think I would go with the asylum because I feel like I would be taking rights from other people who deserve more than me.

Meerab and Haniya both believe that other people whose lives are at actual risk deserve asylum more than them. Even though they are both not out to their families as lesbians and do not think they would come out either, they do not find their lives threatened because they have already found another way to leave their countries of origin. Therefore, they do not consider themselves deserving enough to seek asylum because they have the option of education and employment abroad.

Similarly, when I asked Saeed if he has ever considered seeking asylum, especially after the killings of the LGBTQ activists in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2015 and 2016, he said:

> So the answer is no. And because, as I said, I never got any direct threats. And I never thought that I would be in, even though I felt unsafe, I never thought I would actually be in real danger ever, you know, where somebody would come after me to murder me. And also, I think it was just a lot of work, asylum seeking is such a hectic process that I never actually thought of it. But also, more importantly, I wanted to have the option of going back to my country and be with my family. I think that was the main part of it. And if that meant that I had to be more discreet about my identity, I was okay with that. But I always needed the option to be with my family. And so for all of these reasons, I never applied, or I never even thought of it.

After the 2015-2016 killings of queer activists in Dhaka, many queer people, especially the queer activists left Bangladesh and sought asylum in some western countries such as Sweden,

Norway, Canada, and the UK.[108] Saeed has also been engaged in queer activism in Bangladesh, but he has been very discrete about his identity on public platforms because of which he was not known as a queer person and/or queer activist to people outside of his supportive queer community. This was the reason he never felt directly threatened. He was already preparing to leave for a four-month fellowship program in the USA when the two gay activists were killed at their home in 2016. He did not seek asylum in the US at that time, instead he decided to pursue a PhD there. Even though he does not say directly that "someone else deserves more," his statement that "I never thought I would actually be in real danger ever where somebody would come after me to murder me" shows that he believed that asylum to be most appropriate for those whose life is threatened physically.

5.2.2 Asylum is violent: "I can do better"

Another reason given by many participants for not considering asylum was the difficulty of the asylum-seeking process and the violence inherent in the process. When I asked Aliya if she has ever considered asylum, she said:

> That was a long time ago. Because to be honest, asylum is f****** hard, like, it brings you down a few steps of the ladder rather than, you know, putting you up. And I have had friends who came to the Netherlands and took asylum, but I can do better. You know, I have a good career going on. There's a lot that I can offer there, you know, there are jobs that I can get.

Aliya believes that she can do better by not seeking asylum because the asylum is hard and pulls you down instead of pushing you up. In 2014, she considered seeking asylum and decided to flee to Lebanon and apply for asylum with UNHCR because her younger brother found out that she was gay. She got scared that he would tell their parents and she could not afford to confront them; thus, she made arrangements to flee Jordan with the help of her queer networks in case there was violence directed at her from her family. But then her brother told her that

[108] Raad Rahman, "How Bangladesh's LGBT Community Is Dealing with Threats and Machete Attacks," *Vice* (June 2, 2016). https://www.vice.com/en/article/9b89v3/how-bangladeshs-lgbt-community-is-dealing-with-threats-and-machete-attacks.

even though he is upset that she is gay and does not accept it, he will not tell their parents because they will not be able to deal with it. He warned her to stay careful, so the parents do not find out. After the assurance from her brother that he will not expose her, she decided to stay. She considered asylum only because she considered being exposed as a life-threatening situation for her because honor killing of women and domestic violence against women is a prevalent issue in Jordan.[109] However, now that she is more educated and independent, she does not consider asylum as an option for her because she can do better.

Most participants knew other people who had sought asylum and learned about the difficulties in the asylum process which shaped their own decisions of not considering asylum as a viable option. When I asked Malik if he ever considered asylum as an option, he said:

> No, because asylum wouldn't work as I'm not out. And I'm not in that life threatening situation. So it will definitely not work anyway. That would be basically wasting a big chunk of my life, just timewise, going through the process, because it's not as simple. They will put you in a camp, you will have to, they'll take a very, very long time to process your papers. I have a friend who went to Belgium through asylum, and they basically designed these camps so that you actually get frustrated. You hate it and you just go back. And only those who persevere for a very, very long time and make a very strong case, only those people, after so many years, maybe five, maybe six, I don't know, get proper papers so that they try to work. But even the kind of work that they will do, they are people most probably with not very strong degrees, or just being called refugees or people who seek asylum. You know, something is going to be written on the ID, something's going to be in their papers, they're going to be discriminated against, and they're not going to get proper payment, proper jobs. Yeah, that's gonna be a hell life.

He learned through the experience of a friend that asylum may not work for him because he may not be considered the "proper gay subject" as he is not out to his family and his life is not really threatened. The findings of the researchers like David Murry and Rachel Lewis who have studied the asylum practices and in Canada, the USA and the UK, support Malik's statement that asylum seekers have to prove their belonging to LGBTQ community and that their life is

[109] Rana Husseini, "Rising against so Called Honor Killings in Jordan," *Wilson Center*, (November 25, 2020). https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/rising-against-so-called-honor-killings-jordan; Hiba Balaha, "Until When?! Honor Killings and Other Domestic Violence Against Women in Jordan," *POMED* (blog), (March 8, 2021). https://pomed.org/until-when-honor-killings-and-other-domestic-violence-against-women-in-jordan/.

threatened.[110] At the same time, he has learned that asylum takes a long time to come through and that's a waste of time as after the asylum is granted, the asylee may not have a very livable life because of their refugee status and may not be able to find proper, well-paid job. As Butler asserts that for life to be livable, it should have meaning and value, and it should be more than mere survival.[111] In such circumstances where life becomes mere survival and loses its value (respect and dignity), it makes more sense to him to pursue higher education and employment abroad to as a strategy to migrate from his home country.

Saba's reason for not considering asylum is also influenced by her friends' experiences, even though the actual reason is very different from Malik's:

> I know a lot of people, a lot of Moroccan friends, who are queer and who are now refugees in the Netherlands, mostly, and some in Germany. That requires a very big rupture that I'm not willing to do. I think once they've done that, that is the end for them of a huge part of their life. That breaks the ties with their families. I'm not ready to do that. Education for me is the safest way to get out and to still maintain a sort of [short pause], it's the only way that give meaning to why I left to my friends and to my family, and I really hold on to it. It's one of the ways that my mom can be proud of me.

For Saba, it is important to maintain the family ties with her parents and asylum can create a "rupture" between her and her parents, especially her mother because once she seeks asylum, she may not be able to visit her parents in Morocco. For her education becomes the safest route to migration while also providing her a reason to leave her home country in a respectable manner.

5.3 Conclusion: Educational Migration for Livability

The empowering potential of education is well-understood and exploited by the queer Muslim participants of my research. They all come from different backgrounds, but all of them

[110] See for example, David Murray, "Real Queer: 'Authentic' LGBT Refugee Claimants and Homonationalism in the Canadian Refugee System." Anthropologica 56, no. 1 (2014); and Rachel A.Lewis, "LGBTQ Migration Crises." In The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises, by Rachel A. Lewis, 676–90. edited by Cecilia Menjívar, Marie Ruiz, and Immanuel Ness. Oxford University Press, 2018.
[111] Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 194.

have sought educational opportunities abroad to initiate their migration journey. Even though asylum is an option, but all people preferred to migrate through educational migration. Pursuit of higher education allows an opportunity for queer Muslim women to leave their parental homes (unbearable marriage pressure) without marrying and still be respected in their families and communities which is extremely important for these women's livability. Educational migration becomes the most feasible and affordable way to immigrate to countries, where other options are not easily available for people from South Asia and Middle East and stay there through further settlement options such as work visas, family reunification visas, permanent residency, and asylum. The availability of these options enables them to create a queer livable space where they can live their life in their own terms which I will explore further in the last chapter.

Chapter 6: Creating Queer Livable Space

In this chapter, I explore how queer Muslims define queer livable space and create such a space for themselves through educational migration. They move from their countries of origin in search of a safe space where they can freely express their gender and sexual identities in the western countries with LGBTQIA+ friendly laws and societies. The educational migration allows them financial stability and social standing which makes it easier for them to navigate and defy the expectations of heteronormativity from their families and countries of origin as well as the expectations of homonormativity from the countries of migration. In this queer livable space, they are able to maintain familial ties with their biological families, if they wish, while creating new communities, (chosen) families, and sense of belonging. Defining queer livable space, I argue that queer livable space that queer Muslims create through educational migration is an alternative as well as a resistance to the western notions of queerness and visibility paradigm.

6.1 Defining Queer Livable Space

Queer livable space is about survival, safety, and security; it is about acceptance, harmony, and community. The following quotes demonstrate how queer Muslim participants of this research define queer livable space for themselves. Sumaira, Oditi, Aliya, and Malik highlight safety and freedom of expression as the main element of their queer livable space:

> Sumaira: "A place where I do not have to live in constant fear of violence because of my sexual orientation and where queerness is normalized and LGBTQI people are accepted in the society just like everyone else."
>
> Oditi: "Being able to not just be [myself] outside in the city but also have a small community within the space that I live in, like literally my house. Even that to be queer is important to me."
>
> Aliya: "Where I don't have to look over my shoulder."

> Malik: "Queer livable space is probably somewhere where I can express myself freely and be truly myself without having to put a mask on."

Haniya and Saba highlight social acceptance and social connections as the important aspect of their livable space.

> Haniya: "A place that is perfect for me is where I can be with my girlfriend and people don't judge or call our relationship disgusting."
>
> Saba: "A place I can build connections with other people while maintaining some kind of integrity, where I can be a little more honest about who I am, and the way that I would like to live."

Kadir and Saeed express the importance of family for a place to be queer livable for them:

> Kadir: "Family and family culture is also part of the livable space, physical and/or digital. Coming out or hiding both can be part of making your space livable."
>
> Saeed: "Queer livable space is being with my husband and my cat and dog in Seattle."

All these statements from the participants demonstrate that there is no single definition of queer livable place. People define it according to their needs, concerns, and priorities. These elements become significant for them to lead a meaningful life.

6.2 Being Queer, Being Muslim/Brown/Ethnic

Queer Muslims are not a unified group, they come from different places and backgrounds and identify differently with different aspects of their identities. Safety, security, and freedom of expression of their different identities are at the heart of a livable space for many of them. Sumaira defines queer livable place for her as "A place where I do not have to live in constant fear of violence because of my sexual orientation and where queerness is normalized and LGBTQI people are accepted in the society just like everyone else." Queer livable space is where they can be queer, Muslim, brown, and/or of certain ethnicity at the same time and are accepted for being who they are without facing any harassment, phobias, or physical and psychological violence. This desire to be accepted fully for who they are, queer and Muslims, leads them to choose countries of migration with not only LGBTQI friendly laws

and societies but also places where their other identities are accepted as well, such as liberal academic institutions like Central European University and/or countries with diverse immigrant populations such as the US, the UK, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden. As Saba mentioned while discussing her plans to pursue a PhD and a career in academia, "Academia is probably one of the safest places to be in with such identities, I guess." Similarly, Aliya chose to move to the Netherlands because of the legal and social acceptance of queer people in the country.

Legal and social acceptance of LGBTQIA individuals, such as in some western countries in Europe and North America, is the most important element of queer livable space as it ensures safety and security for these queer Muslims by providing a certain set of rights and protection against violence and discrimination. When asked what makes a space queer livable for him, Malik highlighted acceptance and safety as the key components explaining the difference between London and his home countries, Egypt and UAE where he grew up, studied, and worked before moving to London with his partner.

> Acceptance is, first of all, the main thing. I am living here in London and I'm part of the society and I don't want to be left out. If I'd to be openly gay and married back in my home country, I'll either be prosecuted or at least fined. That's just the legal bit. And probably the whole neighborhood is gonna hate me. My neighbors will hate me, and nobody will want to have a contact with me. People maybe will hurt me on the streets. Something is gonna happen. But then here it's completely different because even if I, every day, march with a gay flag, intentionally telling everybody that I am gay, like nobody cares, really. So the fact that people look at you and they see you as a queer person and then they look away right away. So that means they are okay with it, they don't mind, or this has became part of the norm for them. This gives you a sense that you belong somewhere, like you know, it's fine to be me here. Nobody is looking at me and judging me deep down or at least if they are doing that, they are not showing me that. This means this space is queer safe. And at the same time, I'm not getting hurt on the street, I'm not being scared. … it's very clear when I walk on the street, it's like 'this person is very queer'. But I'm not afraid that I'm gonna be approached by someone or gonna be insulted or gonna be in a fight because of it. This feeling inside that, 'you know what this is safe'. So, acceptance and safety.

London is a queer livable space for Malik because he can be openly gay without fearing for his safety and can marry his same-sex partner which is impossible for him to do in the UAE where

he lived most of his life or in Egypt where he is a citizen. The criminalization of homosexuality increases the chances of homophobia, harassment, and physical violence in these societies. Even though he has not faced any such violence because he lived a life of secrecy, his anticipation of being hated and violated against is not just imaginary. The fact that he feels safe in London in expressing his identity and supporting LGBTQIA causes is because he believes that no one can insult or hurt him because of his queerness. This sense of safety comes from the legal acceptance of the LGBTQIA people in the UK which ensures that people cannot discriminate against anyone because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. His statement that even if someone judges him for being queer, they do not show it because of the legal repercussions demonstrates how important legal acceptance of LGBTQIA is for creating a queer livable space. It does not necessarily mean that discrimination against queer people, especially the queer of color does not exist in London, it just means that even when the society may still not be fully accepting of LGBTQ people, the law can afford some rights and security for queer people. Even if this sense of safety is more imaginary than real, as Weston highlights the situation in San Francisco Bay Area,[112] it provides a sense of relief to these queer Muslims. On the other hand, if the legal system is not supportive, an open and accepting society still cannot always ensure safety or equal rights for queer people. For example, when I worked at an international university in the UAE, my workplace was fully accepting and accommodating of queer people and the university also offered benefits for same-sex partners internally. However, due to the UAE laws against homosexuality, many same-sex couples could not sponsor their partners' visa or had to live in constant fear of being deported. While legal acceptance is crucial for creating a safe queer livable space, social acceptance is equally important to move away from heteronormativity and towards queer normalizing.

[112] Weston "Get Thee to a Big City," 34-35.

The acceptance of not only queer identity but also other identities such as Muslim, Brown, Arab or South Asian is what the participants of this research seek for in their livable space. Aliya mentioned that it is extremely important for her to live authentically with all her identities as queer, Arab and Muslim. "I have always sought to reconcile my Islamic identity with my queer identity because I didn't want to give up on my Islam. Islam is a big part of who I am. I am a Muslim, and I always will be." For her Islam is not just a believe system but a way of living and "it's too much to lose." Since she arrived in the Netherlands, she stands out more as an Arab and Muslim than as a queer person and she is eager to find and connect with other queer Muslims and organize dialogues with them about queer Islams and reconciliation of queer sexualities and Islam. Similarly, Oditi who is visibly queer is also visibly brown. Even though they do not identify as a practicing Muslim, they strongly identify as a cultural Bengali Muslim and do not want to give up either of their identities because of the other. The intersections of their multiple identities as queer Muslims shapes their experiences as well their outlook toward the world and how they want to express themselves and be perceived. Queer livable space does have to be queer only. If one has to give up part of who they are religiously or ethnically because of their queer identity, the life may not be meaningful and livable for them.

Queer Muslims, just like all queers and all migrants, have to prioritize some of their identities over the other and how they express themselves to create a livable space. Some participants, mostly younger ones, choose their queer identity over their Muslim identity and often disassociate with Islam once they have moved abroad where they are not forced to confirm to certain Islamic/religious ways such as head covering for women or praying five times a day. Those who associate with their religious and ethnic identities as much as they associate with their queer identities create a livable space where they can be both. For example, they may seek other queer Muslims and become part of queers of color groups where they can

express all their identities more freely without compromising on the other. For example, Sumaira identifies as a practicing Muslim and upholds the basic pillars of Islam, such as believing, praying, fasting, giving zakat. While she keeps her distance from other South Asian Muslims in case they are homophobic, she has also created a circle with other LGBTQ accepting and supportive Muslims (queer and straight) with whom she can not only practice and celebrate her religious obligations and festivals such as fasting during the month of Ramadan and Eids but also share moments of her everyday life with her female partner. The fact that she can perform her religion and queerness freely as she wants and can share these important aspects of her life with her chosen friends and community gives meaning to her life and makes the space queer livable for her.

Similarly, I have multiple circles of friends, most of whom are aware that I am queer and accepting of it and others who are not aware of my queerness and just see me as an educated Pakistani Muslim woman. I engage with these different circles of friends, mostly separately and sometimes together, in my everyday life to fulfill my need to be who I am, an educated Pakistani/South Asian, feminist, queer, Muslim woman. For me it is not important to be out to everyone as a queer person but being able to maintain healthy and comfortable relationships with people in my surrounding. Miia Linason and Francesca Stella have both discussed the politics of in/visibility in the lives of queer people.[113] This dance between visibility and invisibility depending on the situation allows me and many other participants of my research to create queer livable space. It is the pursuit of higher education and student visa status that makes it possible to move between different aspects of my identity freely and engage with different sets of friends according to my own comfort. For example, when I hang out with some Pakistani friends who I met during an event at the Pakistani embassy, I do not feel the need to disclose my queer identity and the fact that I moved to Budapest to be with my partner. I can

[113] Mia Liinason, "Challenging the Visibility Paradigm"; Stella, "The Politics of In/Visibility."

be just another Pakistani student who is studying in Budapest and wants to stay in touch with her Pakistanis culture and people. The fact that I am in Budapest as a student allows me to create a queer livable space where I can maintain all these different aspects of my identity the way I want.

6.3 Expressing Desires, Navigating Expectations

Another important element of queer livable space for queer Muslims is to navigate familial and social expectations while expressing non-normative desires and identities. Most participants left their family homes because they want to be able to express their gender and sexuality as they want. Many of them, including myself, also left to avoid the societal expectations of marriage and heteronormativity. The migration through education allows them to not only express their desires in the migrated location with more freedom but also navigate the expectations from countries of origin and countries of migration. The most important reason for moving abroad for the younger (between the age of 21-25) participants of my research was to express their gender identities and sexualities publicly without fearing about their safety and security. Moving abroad for higher education has opened their options to express themselves and explore their desires more freely. For example, Yaseen used to go to queer raves and parties in Amman with makeup and nail polish; however, he also had to make sure to remove his makeup and hide his painted nails when he returned home. Now in Budapest, he feels freer to wear fishnets and makeup and walk around the city or take the metro. He also has more dating prospects in Budapest than he had in Jordan. He acknowledges that homophobia, xenophobia, or Islamophobia are common in Budapest, but he has never faced any such threats in public probably because he is a fair skinned tall man who can easily pass as a white gay man. It is in his gay circles he sometimes feels uncomfortable when he is fetishized as an Arab gay man. Regardless, he feels freer to be himself in Budapest than he felt in Jordan and has better dating prospects.

Similarly, when Meerab came to terms with her gayness during her high school, she decided to leave Saudi Arabia, where her family is settled for the last decade because of her father's work, so that she could live and explore her life. Moving back to Jordan during her gap year, she explored her sexuality as freely as she could with the few queer friends she made through joining queer circles. However, she always wanted to study abroad not only because of the high quality of education but also the freedom it could afford her. After moving to Germany, she stopped covering her head, started meeting and dating girls through tinder, but she is still conscious of befriending and coming out to any Arabs and Muslims or using her name with the right spellings on her social media accounts due to the fear of being exposed to her parents. Oditi from Bangladesh, on the other hand, is very open and expressive about their own queer identity and their support for other queers on their social media accounts, particularly on Instagram, just as in their everyday life in Budapest and Vienna. It is possible for them because they are out to and accepted by their parents and brother as a queer person and are outside of Bangladesh where they do not have to fear for their life for sharing such information on their social media. This freedom to be themself, express and act upon their desires in a safe environment is an important aspect of a queer livable space for most of the younger participants of my research.

For most participants particularly assigned female at birth, the queer livable space is also where they can express their desires while navigating social expectations of marriage and heteronormativity. While the younger ones below the age 25 have not yet faced the pressure of marriage, the older participants expressed how moving abroad was also essential for them to navigate the pressure of marriage from their families. For example, Tonima shared:

> I wanted to have sex outside of Bangladesh. It has less social repercussions. … But basically, I had to leave the country because the country itself was unbearable for me. Not just because of my sexual or gender identity, it was also the living circumstances and what was happening in my life then, social expectations that I was a graduate and I needed to get married.

Moving to the Netherlands for higher education and later to Myanmar for work increased her options to explore her sexuality and desire to have sex without social repercussions but also allowed her to navigate the marriage pressure. The migration provided the opportunity and safe space though her pursuit of higher education in the Netherlands was not solely for the purpose of exploring her sexuality. Higher education for her is to create a livable space for herself as a woman first and then as a queer person and economic stability and financial independence that comes with good education and employment is the main component of her livable space. She wants to thrive and not just survive. It is the financial independence that allows her to respectfully navigate the social norms and expectations as a Bangladeshi woman. Financial independence particularly for women is the key factor for navigating familial and societal norms and expectation, such as marriage and heteronormativity, gender roles, and religious dress code. All female participants of my research, especially those in late 20s and early 30s who face marriage pressure, find a way around these expectations when they are not financially dependent on their parents even before moving abroad for higher education. Higher education abroad allows one to delay marriage even further when it becomes impossible to do so while living in the country.

Separation from the family and origin societies coupled with financial independence make it easier for the queer Muslim women to navigate and resist familial and societal expectations. As Aliya highlighted:

> One of the reasons I moved out of the country is to be less under the pressure [of marriage] and for them to be less under the pressure, you know. I know that they love me, and they love to see me but when I'm in their face every weekend, they are reminded of the fact that I am not like all my cousins.

Aliya's reason for move is not only for herself not to be less under the pressure but also her parents to be less under the societal pressure of heteronormative marriage. Her use of the word "less" also demonstrates that this expectation of marriage is not going to disappear but just

decreased because she is not present at her parental home as frequently as she was when she lived in Amman. A couple of year ago, my father told me that because I do not live in Pakistan for so many years, people do not know that this home has a daughter of marriageable age so they would send marriage proposals. He told me this basically to communicate that I should find a man for myself as it is not very likely that I will receive a proposal of a reasonable man in my hometown, especially now that I have passed the desirable young age of early-to-mid-twenties. However, he did not, and could not, know that this was the exact outcome I was seeking by living abroad, to have less marriage proposals. Being able to navigate different familial and societal expectations while having the freedom to express desire for my same-sex partner is what my queer livable space looks like.

6.4 Maintaining (Familial) Ties, Creating (New) Families

Besides navigating marriage and expressing desires, queer livable space is also about harmony and community for queer Muslims. Family, biological or chosen, are usually at the heart of queer livable space for the queer Muslim participants of my research. As Weston discusses in her book, *Families We Choose*, family and kinship are very important for queer people, just like everyone else. While they actively create families based on love, respect, and affinity, these chosen families are not a replacement of the biological families.[114] Much of this is true in the case of queer Muslims as well. Almost all participants mentioned the importance of building a (queer) community that is accepting and supportive while also maintaining some kind of harmonious relationship with their biological families back in their home countries. Due to the collectivist culture and upbringing in South Asia and Middle East, most of the participants have a kind of close relationship with their immediate, and sometimes extended, families which they do not want to give up just because they are not accepted by their families

[114] Weston, *Families We Choose*, 116.

as queer. Their decision to use education as a strategy to migrate is influenced by the strong emotional ties they share with their biological families and their desire to maintain them, as Thomas Wimark has discussed in his research about Turkish gays and lesbians.[115]

All participants, whether they are out to their parents or not, regularly stay in touch with their families, particularly parents making voice or video calls at least once a week or biweekly if not more frequently. In these conversations with families, the queer Muslims filter certain information while sharing other parts of their everyday life with them. This is how they find a balance between keeping their most important family relations such as with their parents and siblings while finding ways to be queer abroad. As Saba said:

> I'm close to my mom, but it's very complicated relationship. It's like, we are really good friends but, in a way, where I need to, I think being away is very important for me to keep a good relationship with her, because it's very difficult balance for me to live my life the way I want to live and maintain a good relationship with her. The only compromise I found is to be abroad because then I can live the way I wanna live, and when I go back home, I can be the daughter she expects me to be.

Hiding about our queerness and same-sex relationship is a huge part of maintaining these familial ties because coming out can cause a huge damage. As Malik explained:

> Me coming out is gonna be a huge earthquake, you know. They might recover from it, or they might not recover altogether. … the constant fear that you are gonna be rejected or that you are gonna lose your family, this is the biggest hurdle, in of it all. I don't mind coming out and I don't mind them judging my personality, things like that. But at the same time, I don't want to be losing my family.

Malik comes from a very big close-nit family from his mother's side. His mother has seven siblings, all of whom have children and grandchildren. He really wants his mother to know and understand that he is gay and married to David, whom all his family members consider a close friend of his. But he knows that she may not accept him not only because of her religious beliefs

[115] Wimark, "The Impact of Family Ties on the Mobility Decisions of Gay Men and Lesbians," 663-65.

and cultural values but also because of losing her face in her family. It can hurt her to the point that it may cause her death and that will not be bearable or livable for him.

Most participants expressed this fear of losing their parents if they tell them the news of their queerness. The losing of family is not only to death, while most fear that as well, it is also that the family may not want to keep any relation with them. For instance, Meerab shared that she played out scenarios in her mind for coming out to her parents when she was younger but now that she's older she does not think coming out to her parents is a good idea.

> I'm in Germany, I'm living my life. I'm very open. I have a girlfriend, a partner. I'm living my life fully visibly. And they are very far away from me. I know I'm not gonna get their validation. I know once I tell them, there's gonna be a huge backlash. … And my dad or my mom could actually have a heart attack or, you know, something could happen to them.

She understands that coming out to her parents may not do any good to her or her parents and it can even make life unlivable for her. She is still dependent on them financially as her father covers her living cost in Germany where she is studying. Her father can stop paying for her education or in the worst-case scenario, either of her parents could die because of the shock and she would not be able to live with the guilt of causing her parents' death. These sentiments of losing parents are expressed by many other participants as well. As Malik said, "I don't wanna lose my mom just because I'm gay or queer." Yaseen also shared that his mother may know in her heart that he is gay as she has seen him with pierced ears and nail polish, something that only gay men do in Jordan; however, he never wants to tell her by himself as he is afraid that she may not accept it and may alienate him. "I love my mom, I don't wanna lose her."

Kadir came out to their sisters and mother who, after the initial shock and rejection, now understand and accept them as a gender non-binary and gay person. However, in conversation with their mother and sisters, Kadir decided not to come out to their father as it could make the space unlivable for them:

> We all talked and decided that it's better not to tell because most likely he wouldn't be able to take it. He is like 70 or something and a super religious Muslim. … I'm not gonna hate my father. I still talk to him. I cannot come out to him. In a patriarchal society, sometimes fathers have a lot of influence on the other family members as well. I'm very sure that if my father cuts ties with me, he would make it unbearable for my mom to contact me.

While the fear of losing parents to death is real, but it is also the fear of losing this relationship that makes most participants hold off this information from their parents. All the participants understand the complexity of the situation and try to find a balance between keeping their parents in their life at least in some way even when they cannot share all parts of their life with them. Aliya puts it beautifully: "For me, I am into having a peaceful relationship with my parents who are in their sixties. I will never change them, and they are never gonna change and we need to accept." Because it is unrealistic to expect them to change at this point in life, it is easier for queer Muslims to accept them as they are and keep them in their life for as long as they can. Living with the pain of losing one's parents and biological family may not be very livable, even if the space without them is queer.

As most queer Muslims receive little to no acceptance of their queerness in their biological families, it is very important for them to create communities and chosen families where they can be their queer selves and support each other. All participants mentioned the need for a supportive and accepting community as an essential part of their queer livable space. Different people look for different qualities in their queer (supportive) communities and chosen families. For some, it is essential that all the people this chosen family/community are queer so they share their queer identity with them, while for some others it is enough to have supportive people in their circles regardless whether they themselves are queer or not. Most people want to create their communities and chosen families based on multiple shared identities, background and experiences, such as other queer Muslims, or Queer Arabs/South Asian, or queers of color so they can connect with each other beyond just their gender and sexuality such as language, food, music, traditional values and events.

6.5 Conclusion: Moving Between Visibility and Invisibility

Queer livable space is not an ideal utopian space where queer Muslims can be free of any pressures, social expectations, fears, and violence. It is rather a space of constant resistance and negotiation where the queer Muslims are the active agents in deciding for themselves the kind of life they would like to live. They move between being visible and invisible as queers depending on the situation they are in and the people they are with, challenging both heteronormativity and homonormativity. They want to live an open and expressive life where they can freely choose their partners and be acknowledged and accepted for being who they are, while at the same time becoming invisible in the unsafe spaces, digital or physical. Queer livable space for them is where they can be queer without having to give up other aspects of livability in their lives, whether it is the relationship with their families or the respect in the society. The educational migration allows them to create such spaces because of the agency and respectability that comes with it.

Conclusion

My thesis is an attempt to understand why queer Muslims migrate from their countries of origin and how they create queer livable spaces for themselves, often in the west, through educational migration. The participants have highlighted different circumstances in their parental homes and/or countries of origin/residence that were becoming unlivable for them because of which they decided to migrate. As they planned to leave, all of them looked for educational opportunities in the west as a method of migration instead of other means such as asylum because of the prestige and affordability of international education, feasibility of the migration process, and employability and settlement prospects after completion of the education. Asylum on the other hand is considered only as a last resort because of the difficulty of the process, precarity of the refugee status, and fear of losing connection with biological families and communities. Queer livability is at the heart of these decisions to migrate, when and where, and whether to take the educational route or the asylum. The queer livable spaces the queer Muslim participants of this research are trying to create depend on their individual needs and desires. At the heart of these queer livable spaces are safety and security, freedom of expression, family and community, and harmony and dignity. Educational migration allows them to create such queer livable spaces and these spaces are not a utopia but a constant resistance and negotiation. Queer Muslims not only negotiate the expectations of marriage and heteronormativity from their families and countries of origin but also the homonormative, Islamophobic, and xenophobic systems of oppressions in the countries of migration.

It is important to remember that the participants of this research come from certain socio-economic backgrounds with access to education and other social and financial resources in their home countries which enable them to seek higher education abroad and initiate the

migration process. Not all queer Muslims have the same means. For some seeking asylum is the only option and their only way to leave the unlivable conditions they are faced with in their countries of origin. There are also those who decide to stay and find other innovative ways to create a livable space for themselves in their countries. However, those who decide to migrate and use education as a strategy to migrate because they can help us understand this alternative means of queer migration that research on asylum does not provide. It highlights the importance of livability that asylum policies fail to provide those faced with homophobia, persecution, and violence.

Drawing upon these findings of my research, I would also like to offer some recommendations to immigration authorities to devise policies to address the needs of this group of queers to offer opportunities of migration such as permanent residence or work permit so they can migrate to safer locations as productive members of community instead of having to seek asylum. Dignity and respect, both in the countries of origin and the countries of migration, is an important element of the livable lives these queer Muslims are trying to create through educational migration. Asylum is not a dignified option as it exposes the asylum seekers to physical and psychological abuse while in the process as well as the fear of losing their biological family members back in home countries. Immigration authorities can come up with more dignified option of migration, something that is less expensive than a permanent residency and less time consuming, less daunting, and violent than seeking asylum.

I would also like to recommend higher educational institutions to have stronger support systems for such individuals who may be under extreme psychological distress especially during their last academic year/semester as they fear the possibility of return and are simultaneously trying to figure out their next steps – jobs and further studies. Some participants have expressed how stressed they were to have to secure a PhD or a job before the end of their studies. Some of them even applied for second MAs or a PhD regardless of the exhaustion and

burnt out and/or lack of interest in the further studies just to keep their options open. Having psychological and career counseling opportunities that students not only have access to but also feel comfortable seeking out will be a great help for such students during and after their studies.

Research such as this is important to make changes in institutional policies and practices and as it highlights the lived realities that must be taken into consideration when devising policies. Extensive research on asylum policies and practices has given immigration authorities in many countries to change and improve their systems. Queer (Muslim) migrants are a marginalized population and queer migration is a comparatively newer field of study which needs to expand into areas not considered yet, such as connection between education and queer migration. This research and framework of queer livable space contributes to the scholarship on queer migration and highlights that livability is at the center of migration decisions.

Appendix 1: Call for Participation in Research about Queer Migration

Hello,

I am an MA student at Central European University (CEU) in Budapest and Vienna. I am looking for research participants for my MA thesis which explores the connections between pursuit of higher education and queer migration and diaspora.

I have observed that many queer people use higher educational opportunities in Europe as a strategy to migrate from their home countries in order to escape (or delay) the societal pressures of marriage, heteronormativity, and confirming to gender norms. Through this research, I aim to explore why and how queer Muslim people, particularly women, use education as a strategy of migration from Muslim majority countries to the western countries.

I will be conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews (online and offline depending on participant's location) in English which will be recorded and used only for the purpose of this research. I understand the sensitivity of my research topic, especially for those who might not be out to their families and/or community and/or may have had traumatic experiences in expressing their gender and sexuality and/or in the process of migration. Therefore, I will be taking all the measures to maintain the confidentiality of all the participants and abide by the ethical standards of doing no harm to the best of my ability and according to the CEU ethical research guidelines. I am also collecting/developing a list of resources online to support participants whose experiences of trauma may get triggered during the interview.

If you identify as queer and Muslim and have sought to use educational opportunities to migrate to the west and would like to participate in my research voluntarily, please fill out this form.

If you have more questions about my research or the procedure, please feel free to contact me through my email: Noureen_Asma@student.ceu.edu.

1. Your Name *

2. Your email ID so I can contact you for interview scheduling purposes*

3. Do you identify as queer (used as a loosely defined umbrella term to describe non-heterosexual, non-normative, and gender alternative/non-confirming individuals such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, intersex, gender non-binary, etc)? *

   Yes No

4. Do you identify as Muslim (politically, culturally, religiously, ideologically, and/or spiritually)? *

Yes No

5. Have you sought and availed educational opportunities (BA/MA/PhD/Postdoc) in a western country as an option to migrate from your home country? *

Yes No

6. Your current location (will be helpful in scheduling the interview)

7. Are you available for 2-4 hours during August and December 2020 for an online/offline interview? *

Yes No

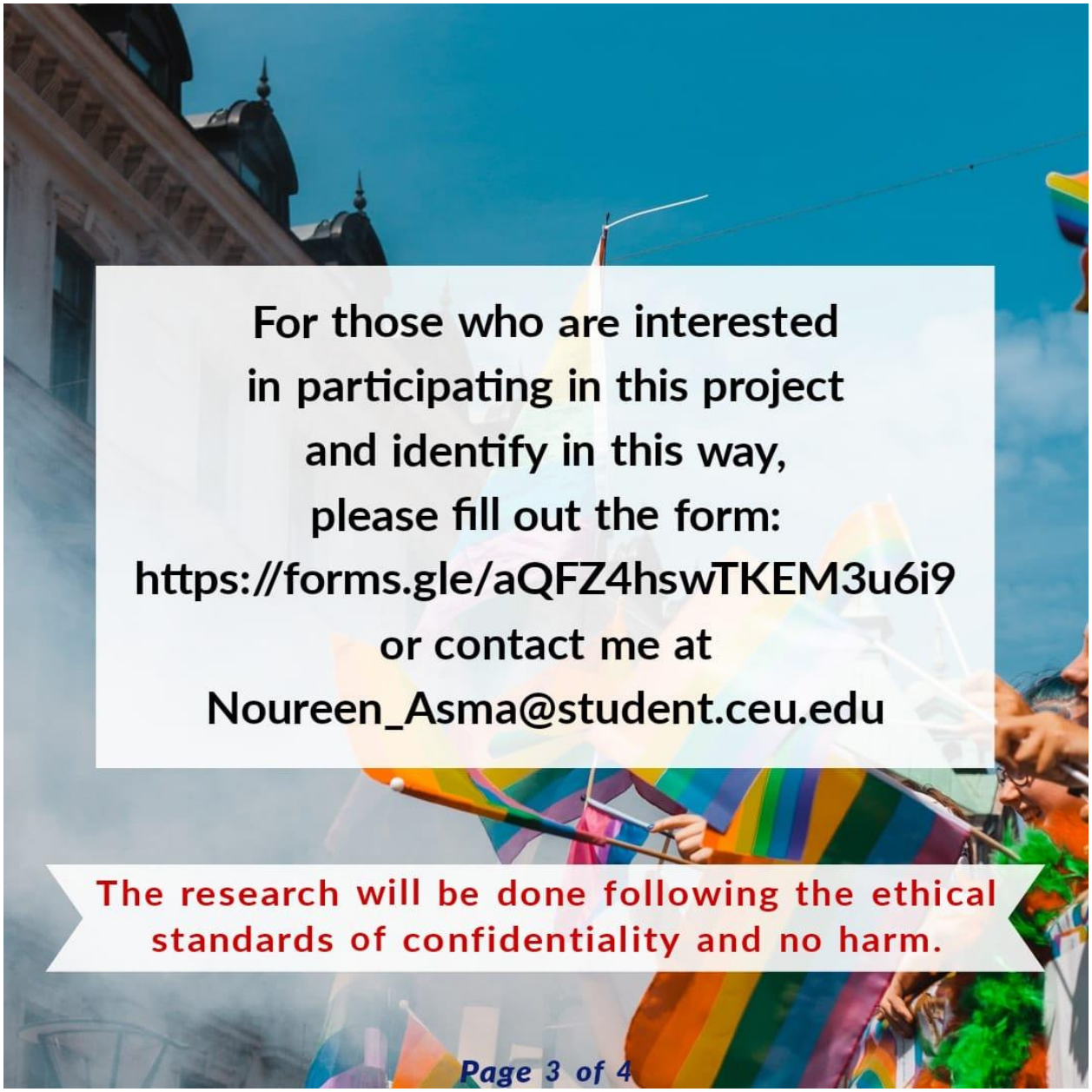
8. The interview will be conducted in English, is it okay with you? *

Yes No

9. Which online platform would you prefer for the interview? *

Skype Zoom Jitsi Other:

10. Any questions/comments about the research?



Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form

Creating Livable Spaces: Queer Muslims' Use of Education as a Migration Strategy

Asma Noureen, Masters Candidate
Department of Gender Studies, Central European University

This is to certify that I, _____, agree to participate in the research being conducted by Asma Noureen of the Gender Studies Department at Central European University. The extent of my involvement in this project will be to participate in one or more interviews with Asma Noureen, the primary investigator, in which I will be asked to speak about my own life and my experiences. My participation in this project is voluntary, and I may refuse to participate, withdraw at any time, and/or decline to answer any questions without negative consequences.

A. PURPOSE

I have been informed that the purpose of this research is to gain a broader understanding of how queer Muslim people, particularly women, create livable spaces for themselves in the west through educational migration. The interviews will be combined with theoretical analysis about queer migration, education, and diaspora to produce a master's thesis and may potentially be used for future publications. This research is being performed under the guidance of Dr. Hadley Z. Renkin and Dr. Nadia Jones Gailani assistant professors of gender studies at Central European University.

B. PROCEDURES

This component of the research consists of a series of interviews conducted between the researcher, Asma Noureen, and the interviewees. The interview(s) will be recorded on the personal cell phone of the researcher or through the Zoom/Skype audio/video recording system and the recordings from the interview(s) will remain in the private care of the researcher for transcription and analysis purposes. Written transcripts may be included in the final publication of the research, unless otherwise indicated by the interviewee. I also understand that part or whole of the interview transcript might also be shared with the supervisors.

Interviewees will be provided with a copy of the written transcript and/or audio/video files if so desired. In the resulting papers and publications, the interviewee will not be identified by name, instead a pseudonym will be used in place of her real name, unless the interviewee prefers to be recognized and provides a written consent for that.

C. RISKS and CONFIDENTIALITY

I understand that even though the topic of the research is sensitive as it explores the lives of queer Muslims, there are minimal risks associated with participation in this interview. All information collected through the interview(s) will be anonymized and all the identifiable information will be removed in the publications and presentation of the research to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

Interviewee can also withdraw their participation from the interview at any time without any negative consequences. During the interview the interviewee may request to stop the recording at any time to discuss or clarify how they wish to respond to a question or topic before proceeding. In the event that the interviewee chooses to withdraw their participation entirely from the project during the interview, any tape made of that particular interview and any previous interviews will either be given to the participant or destroyed, along with any transcripts made from previous interviews.

Upon completion of the interview, the tape and content of the interview belong to the researcher, Asma Noureen, and the information in the interview can be used by Asma Noureen for the purposes of the master's research, and in any further publication or presentation of research.

D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION (please initial to give consent)

_____ I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time before, during and after the interview without any negative consequences.

_____I agree to have my interview(s) recorded

_____ I agree to be quoted anonymously in the presentation of the research

_____I agree to the release of the transcript(s) of my interview(s) for the purpose of publication

_____I request copies of the final publications of the research, to be sent to me at the following email address: _____

E. INTERVIEWEE'S COMMENTS

Please identify below any desired restrictions related to the collection and publication of information from your interview(s).

I HAVE CAREFULLY READ THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

Interviewee Name: _____

Interviewee Signature: _____Date: _____

Interviewer Signature: _____Date: _____

Should you have any questions or concerns about this project or your rights as a participant, please contact Asma Noureen at Noureen_Asma@student.ceu.edu or +36706725313 or her supervisors, Dr. Hadley Z. Renkin at RenkinH@ceu.edu and Dr. Nadia Jones Gailani at JonesN@ceu.edu.

I WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM FOR MY OWN RECORDS.

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