Runia Reflected: Talk Amongst Outsiders in Bangladesh
Kathryn Hummel

I was in Bangladesh to write about women – or, more accurately, had returned to Bangladesh to test whether lives like Runia’s could be contained by the page. Even before I began, those surrounding me were able to articulate, with enviable velocity, what it was I would be writing. Fahad’s politics made him weary of neo-colonial foreign researchers whose work meant nothing to Bangladesh; he declared that, if he were a woman, he would never agree to talk to me. While attending a friend’s lunch party, I met an elegantly turned-out woman who wondered why I had come all the way to Bangladesh for my research – didn’t women in Australia have stories of their own? My method of informal ethnographic interview sounded marvellous to Gourab, though he felt the need to point out that I clearly didn’t know Bangladesh well enough to attempt to write about it; trying to learn was fruitless. While talking to Sayeeda, a prominent cog in a Bangladeshi non-government organisation (NGO), I couldn’t help but reveal my feeling of displacement in Dhaka. ‘All women are exiles,’ she replied softly. This statement impressed me as a brilliant stroke of sympathy ‘til I got to know Sayeeda better and found that she often tested aloud lines for the novel she was writing in her spare time. Even Runia, when I first met her, seemed already to know the direction my work would take. While I admired her insight, I remained unconvinced by her redefinition of ethnographic portraiture as ‘case studies’. It was not until mid-February that we really began to talk. I arrived at the appointed time to learn more.

Runia began, ‘Last time, I told you, you already know, heh, that I’m a woman-loving woman. I told you, no?’ In Bangla, the word for homosexual is shomokami, which in stark definition means ‘same sex’. Hating the way the word narrows down relationships that are emotional, psychological and spiritual as well as sexual, Runia explained she prefers shomopremi, or ‘same love.’ Excluding men from her reasoning because of their more dominant standing in Bangladesh, Runia said the denial of shomopremi was another violation of women, together with forcing them to marry before they know they want to, let alone whom they want to love. Runia cited that sixty per cent of girls in Bangladesh are married before the legal age of eighteen: ‘Just imagine!’

It was not a surprise when Runia explained that in Bangladesh, same-sex loving is shrouded in ‘total silence and invisibility,’ seen by society, religion and culture as ‘abnormal and bad’. Swaprova, the woman-loving women’s support group Runia established, does not have a large public profile and is not yet concerned with political activism: its name, derived from the Bangla for ‘self’ and ‘light’, refers to the individual reflecting her existing brightness. Through personal contact and communication, Runia was able to gather one, then more, then about fifteen members of the group. Every month, behind Runia’s front door, Swaprova members share their stories and counsel one another. Or rather, Runia spends time counselling the younger members who still need to graduate, find a job and some kind of economic independence before even starting to think about living openly as woman-loving women. What Runia would have wanted for her younger self may motivate her, although she did not implicitly say so – and on this point I didn’t insist.

Fresh from university with a Masters in Social Welfare, Runia was first employed at a local NGO. Later she was offered a first class gazette officer post in a government job, a position sought after in Bangladesh not for the prestige but for the fringe benefits – pensions and so on that do not exist in any other industry. Despite the series of exams to sit and the bad rural postings that follow, everyone in Bangladesh, so a friend told me, wants a government job. During her government service Runia won a scholarship to study a second Masters in the Netherlands, focusing on women and sustainable development. After returning to Bangladesh, Runia had the choice of going back to her government job or accepting a managerial position with the UN. Working in a government job narrows Bangladesh’s already small community – Runia described her former office as a place ‘where people especially in social matters have unnecessary interest, unnecessary interference, unnecessary talking behind, heh, and I felt that I don’t like that, heh, so that’s why I thought it’s better not to go back.’

For all her enjoyment of and her gratitude to the UN for giving her insight into her country, Runia realised, after her long career, that she was not in a true sense really enjoying the work: ‘It’s a good job, good salary, posh environment, so altogether everything is fine, there is no complaint but I felt in my heart that this is not really what I really want.’ In the end, Runia decided no other job would give her more opportunity or satisfaction than the UN. ‘So altogether after working for thirty years...I have taken voluntary early retirement,’ she told me.

Withdrawing from her professional persona is the first thing Runia is seeking to do in her retirement: ‘I want to give time to myself, and want to do little things that I value.’ Hearing this, I became suffused with doubt about how much precious time she would wish to give to my ‘case study’. At the same time, I remembered her saying brusquely (she always does seem brusque when she isn’t laughing): ‘I’m comfortable because I trust you and you want to know me and I want to...yeah, I want to contribute as much as I can. I’m comfortable to share with you, that’s it.’ I wondered how much of a performance I was getting from Runia; how much of her self-reflected light was concealed behind her self-composure.

During our second talk I noticed what a still person Runia was. She never fidgeted, whereas I was always trying to manoeuvre my legs into a better position, evidently looking so uncomfortable that Runia once interrupted herself to ask if I needed another pillow. She was perfectly as ease lying against the sofa with her back to the window, leaning on a cushion she’d moved onto the floor, with her arms above her head. During our second talk she laughed more and advised me on my growing relationship with Hossain, a local filmmaker: I could break if off, no problem, if I was not sure. There is not much to be sure of in the world, except that it is unjust – even for those who put their faith in work and God (by various names). Runia is a religious person whose thoughts and everyday acts are performed according to her own way, not guided by institutional faith. Runia veered off the path set down for a Bangladeshi Muslim woman – or girl, she amended, correcting my assumption that her rebellion occurred later in life. When she was about twelve years old Runia learned to read the Qur’an in Arabic because her parents willed it. Now, years later, she can’t remember a single word and is dumbfounded by this lapse: ‘How come? Once you learn

something, once you learn a language, reading a language, then you can forget that?’
The strange machine of memory can block from us things we never thought we’d lose
and things we wanted to remember. What Runia does recall is that when she was
made to pray in the institutional way, she realised what she was intoning did not come
from her heart. ‘Rather,’ she reflected, ‘I liked lying down and closing my eyes and
then saying something to God that I believed in, heh, that God give me wisdom to
know your way and give me strength to go accordingly, this kind of thing, heh, I
enjoy, so I take that as my prayer...So I prayed for some times in their way but not in
my own way.’

Runia’s family has had greater influence on her than any out-of-touch mullah,
but even her parents and eldest sister have not convinced Runia to pray five times a
day, to fast, and travel to Mecca for hajj. ‘I feel hurt, I feel bad that I cannot satisfy
them,’ Runia confided, ‘and I also question, heh, that why they have to ask me for
those things, when they should not.’ She laughed and wondered if they thought it was
their duty to guide her, and whether it was her duty not to follow.

‘Last week,’ I began, ‘you mentioned you’d been married at an early age...?’
‘I was fourteen and a half...’
‘And your parents arranged it for you?’
‘Yes, that was arranged but that was not forced I would say.’

As a teenager, Runia had a strong interest in study but was not allowed to
attend high school. She began to study by herself at home and was permitted to go to
school once a year to take her final exam. Although she passed Class 6 and 7, when
she was fourteen and a half and studying Class 8, it became difficult for Runia to
study by herself, particularly English and mathematics, without help.

At the same time a proposal came to Runia’s father from a nearby family,
declaring an interest in his girl for their boy. The proposal was discussed with Runia
and her family and, in the end, Runia’s father made an agreement with the boy’s
parents: the marriage could proceed if the boy’s family arranged for Runia to continue
her studies and obtain her secondary school certificate.

‘In general,’ Runia told me, ‘getting married at that age was not anything new;
it was normal and usual. And my other sisters also married at that age, heh. So yes I
saw that girls my age, they got married, they live with men. Ah, but I did not know
exactly the physical relationship, I mean, what is that and how it happens and how
you feel.’

‘So no one really explained that deeply, intimately to you,’ I said.
‘This is also normal that it was not explained to me. This is a subject that is
hidden and something that you should feel shy to discuss...socially, culturally it is a
shame, like this.’

Six months after her marriage, Runia left her village for the first time and went
to live in the district where her husband was working. She then started an entirely
different life at her husband’s house and at high school. The campus was only for
girls, with plenty of trees and enough space to run around at leisure. The enjoyment
she felt at school contrasted against the private life that Runia shared with ‘that man’.
Her husband was at least ten years older than Runia and although he was not a bad
type – not abusive, that is – Runia explained that ‘he expected, heh, what a man
expects from his wife, you know? That I would have sex with him, do all the
housework and listen nicely to whatever he said. A typical Bangladeshi man.’

‘Runia Reflected: Talk Amongst Outsiders in Bangladesh.’ Kathryn Hummel.
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 6 no. 2, May 2014.
There was no question of life getting better but for a while it was the same, divided between home and study. All the while Runia struggled with being a wife, but gave most of her attention to passing her high school exam – ‘not more than that.’ Yet after this dream was realised, Runia felt the desire to try for admission to college. ‘No way!’ protested her husband. ‘I kept my word, given at our marriage. No way, I can let you study at college.’ Runia had a little money of her own, a wedding present from her elder sister, and used it to pay for her college admission. Even when her husband discovered what she had done, she ignored his disapproval and continued her studies.

At college, Runia met new people from a new place, including two students from the Catholic mission. She visited their church and was impressed with how nice everything was. Most of all, she was impressed by the lifestyle of her new friends, who were unmarried and devoted their lives to the welfare of other people. ‘I felt that oh, my God, so that is really real life and that is great life’ and made up her mind about something. ‘I told my so-called husband that hey, I don’t want to live with you. I want to divorce you and I want to be a Christian, I want to be a nun and I want to live that life.’ In the beginning her husband took it as a joke but then realised from her eyes and face that Runia was serious – or mad. He sent a hasty telegram to his father-in-law to come sharp. Runia’s father arrived, conferred with her husband and told Runia that her mother was ill and he had come to take her home.

As she had suspected, Runia’s family tried to persuade her that her place was with her husband and any other way was crazy. ‘I was fed up after a month,’ she recalled. One night her father told Runia that she had to decide what she wanted to do. She repeated her earlier words: I want to be a Sister and live in the mission. Since his words had had no effect, Runia’s father began to beat her; this made her determined to run away. After two or three days, Runia travelled to the mission and told the two Sisters that she had run away from home. Their panicked response, Runia remembered, was to tell her that she must go back – parents are next to God, and it was not God’s way to run away.

Blindly, Runia hailed a rickshaw and, without much thought, directed the rickshaw puller towards the launch terminal, knowing that from there many steamboats go to different places in the country. ‘I only knew that but I did not know where to go or how to live my life,’ she said. They were nearing the terminal when another rickshaw puller called out from behind, saying that he had been sent from the mission to tell Runia to go back.

‘Could be,’ she mused. ‘Or they were a little scared that if something bad happened, if I committed suicide or something and left a note behind that I went to the mission and I was refused shelter, they would be in trouble.’

To avoid blame, the four missionaries – Father, Mother and two sisters – took Runia to the police station and asked permission to keep her at the mission until her family fetched her; the police gave it lazily. When Runia’s family did come to reclaim their girl, a long discussion ensued at the mission, but apart from agreeing to continue the next morning, nothing was resolved. That night, the missionaries asked her, ‘You love us don’t you? Do you want to put us, the whole mission in trouble, in danger?’ They advised her to go back to her family.

For the whole night Runia could not sleep for thinking what to do, what to do

and how to save herself, how to save the mission and what to do. She knew that under any situation her family would not agree to her life as a Christian, so she had to change the conditions into something they would fulfil. The next day, Runia announced that she would only leave the mission if her family arranged a divorce from her husband and promised to support her study. If they did not keep their word, she warned, ‘You know by this time what I can do and I will do again even worse, I will make things harder for you. I meant that and they recognised that that yes, this girl can do that, heh, because she’s brave or she’s crazy or I don’t know what.’

Runia laughed, even at the scandal of ‘putting down in the grave’ the reputation and good name of her family. Her dishonour, particularly to her father, was an ‘extreme, extreme thing.’

‘Don’t you love how brave and crazy are mixed?’ I asked.

‘I will say that it depends on how you define craziness, heh. I was crazy to continue my study but I was not out of my head.’

Runia sensed that her family held the missionaries responsible for her disobedience and that the mission, in return, desperately wanted a peaceful solution. When Runia’s family agreed to her conditions, the missionaries were happily relieved; she was simply happy to have won the fight, despite the shoram she had brought upon others. To deflect the shame of her running away, Runia’s parents had told the neighbours that their son-in-law had come in the night to take their daughter back to his village. Yet after three days, the local police came to her parent’s house to announce that she was at the mission. A visit from the police was a big event in any village and a crowd gathered around to hear the news. Gossips invented their own story to spread, one that cast Runia as a romantic heroine who had fallen in love with a Christian man and run away with him to live in the mission.

I laughed as she told me. ‘Oh right, so that’s more scandal.’

Smiling, Runia replied, ‘So that’s two scandals together.’

Her father and mother did not speak to her after they took her home, but Runia walked and swam and climbed the trees, not caring whether they spoke or not. With a laugh, she recalled that her parents instructed her brother-in-law, who initiated divorce proceedings for her, to ‘do whatever you want, don’t ask us anything, just let her go to hell.’ After the divorce was final, Runia went to live with her sister and brother-in-law in Dhaka, which could be described as a different kind of hell. Admitted into a new college in Dhaka, Runia recommenced her studies and again, started a new life.

Although they never told her to remarry, Runia always knew that her parents wanted to see her settled, safe and secure in their own terms – that is, married with children – before they died. Runia’s second marriage was neither a love match nor a family arrangement, nor was she carried away by anything other than platonic emotion. The same cannot be said for her husband-to-be, a colleague from her days of government service, who had pursued Runia for three years, sending love letter after love letter, before she succumbed to his proposal. ‘Heh, I did not give a deep thought about what is love exactly in life,’ Runia admitted. With a laugh she added, ‘I didn’t know that it would not work out.’

Runia was prepared to sacrifice her ‘inner romanticism’ and emotional attachment to women for a good kind of man. Yet she soon found she could not like

her new husband as a person; did not like his attitude or way of doing things; found him to be a very traditional, domineering man. Although Runia’s husband accompanied her to Holland while she studied her second Masters, their partnership was shaky and he soon declared his intention to leave. Runia requested that he return to Bangladesh until she finished her degree, after which she would follow and work out how to repair their marriage. But her husband would not wait and Runia, forced to decide there and then, announced it would be better to live apart. During the ten years that followed, she had no contact with her husband. ‘I didn’t bother to divorce him because the official piece of paper did not mean anything to me. Mentally, heh, I felt that it’s over,’ she told me. Eventually, on the practical advice of a friend, Runia did pursue the piece of paper and was officially divorced for the second time.

Since we are all reacting against something, I asked Runia if being married helped her isolate what she didn’t want. She replied that after the second marriage, getting into a relationship with a man was something she knew she would never want again. And having children? I wondered. Runia admitted surprise at never having conceived a child during her first marriage, particularly as she did not know how to prevent pregnancy. If she had fallen pregnant, her life would have been entirely different: she would have needed to stay with the father and would never have become independent. Marriage sharpened Runia’s vision, including her need for an education. ‘All these things happened, so in that way it has a link to marriage,’ she told me. ‘Otherwise marriage as such, it has not had much influence on my life.’

By the time our talk was over and it was evening, Runia was preoccupied as she walked me to the door. I hesitated over an impulse to hug her, uncertain how far over her boundary this would be. I thought of the abrupt dissolution of her second marriage and felt something for her husband—not pity, but a small realisation that his position would not have been uncomplicated. As the lift descended I regretted my decision not to hug Runia. All the formality, it seemed, was coming from me.

One afternoon, Runia and I were sitting on her balcony when rain began to drop into our tea cups. The storm that followed was a loud reminder that barsa would soon bring monsoon to break the enduring heat of spring. We sat for a while to catch the coolness then moved under the doorway.

The number of good women in Bangladesh, mused Runia, seems to outweigh the number of good men. It can happen that women find their match, she told me, but mainly when they meet men outside their country and the expectations of their culture. If a woman doesn’t meet the right man, her situation is rarely as simple as accepting with a shrug the single life, a frightening fate in a country where family almost amounts to a religion. ‘Women who are progressive, educated, smart or feminist and remain in Bangladesh bear the pain, heh.’ For the sake of the children, for the sake of duty and the responsibility, to keep clan reputations intact and above reproach, a woman must, said Runia, ‘adjust.’ She went on: ‘I personally think that life is simply an adjustment, altogether. We adjust with our family, we adjust with that friend, we adjust with our colleagues, we adjust in any situation...But still, it’s always women first, heh. They are expected to adjust more; they are always expected to adjust first.’

Pursuing the idea of adjustment, I remarked how matter-of-factly Runia told me the stories of her struggles, as though she was reading out a report of a woman

with the same name and experiences, somehow disconnected from her own life. Runia admitted a change in her manner. Now she doesn’t cry, doesn’t need to escape to the washroom or be comforted by her friends when she discusses her past. At fifty-nine, through God’s help and her own strength, Runia ‘cannot just let myself flow in the water like that.’ Instead, Runia dams up her emotions for inner exploration, though it can be unbearable to feel an emotion like pain, pleasure or desire and to stop it deliberately. ‘It gives,’ continued Runia, ‘the impression that you are a robot’ – or at least a human who manages everything so impeccably you have no need of support or company. Not true. All it means is that Runia never appears to cry.

At that moment, a tear swelled from the outer corner of Runia’s right eye and then from her left. The pain of bearing pain and of not crying can make you cry – then laugh again, as Runia promptly did.

Being an independent woman is fine, but it is also desirable to find and live with a partner who matches you and with whom you can share your emotions. Several times now, Runia has mentioned how wonderful this is. My own attitude is not blasé but undirected: a partner will come when I’m ready to receive him/her, as long as I continue to push my life forward in a general way, just as the lists I used to make for myself in more focussed years were all fulfilled, sooner or later. ‘Maybe you have not come to that stage yet,’ Runia responded. Her independence has been the biggest thing, but even though she has a house and money she does not have a human being to love. ‘So I think that yes, that is unfulfilled part,’ she said. ‘I feel that I have everything, but that part is missing.’

Runia had been living with a partner for one year before they discovered in what real sense they were different. ‘It’s unfortunate,’ said Runia, veering away from the experience in order to talk in general terms. ‘The longing for other human beings to care and feel cared for is deep.’ The start of the azan caught the end of her words and boomed through the window like an unsubtle sign from God.

I remember well enough the hasty discarding of my virginity and, I suppose, the simultaneous branding of myself as heterosexual in the act. Runia’s experience was different: she identified in her early life as a woman-loving woman but she could never truly name it. Her first marriage muddled her sexual instincts with duty, yet still Runia knew she felt emotionally closer to women. She recalled a girlhood crush on an older neighbour, which she expressed by gathering fruit to present to the woman, who no doubt thought Runia was a sweet child. Runia did not connect this idolisation to a romantic attraction to women until her final year of college.

Runia’s relationship with her college girlfriend came to a sudden end when the girlfriend discovered she was more partial to her college tutor, married him and left the country. For this sudden twist there was no explanation, apart from the worn out excuse of love. Runia chuckled as she told me how she could not figure out what had happened, particularly as the girls’ plan to live together after college was so serious they had started to collect objects for their future home. For two years the items were chosen and stored carefully in a trunk that Runia kept in the room of her dormitory, away from her girlfriend’s nosy mother.

For six or seven years after college, throughout university, from one place to another, Runia kept the trunk with her. She simply did not know what to do with it. Years later, she mentioned it to her ex-girlfriend. Now a married lady and a visitor to Bangladesh, the woman wondered at the absurdity of the collection remaining.

‘Runia Reflected: Talk Amongst Outsiders in Bangladesh.’ Kathryn Hummel. 
_Transnational Literature_ Vol. 6 no. 2, May 2014. 
unused, with Runia. Without a word to anyone about the real weight of the trunk, Runia donated it to her student niece. She told me this was the end, but the writer in me disagreed – even with its contents dispersed, the trunk is a perfect metaphor for a loaded memory.

As her recollections latched together, Runia remembered that, during a later visit to Bangladesh, her ex-girlfriend announced she would arrange her old friend’s marriage. ‘Crazy,’ Runia said. ‘She knew I loved women but had become very religious over the years and thought women loving women was a sin.’ Runia challenged the idea of marriage and a man as antidotes to her transgressions; she challenged her friend. What were you when we had our relationship? Did you make a mistake or are you a sinner? The lady remained silent, safe in her marriage, her children and her morality. In conversation with me, Runia also fell silent before bursting out: ‘Imagine, just imagine! These people I mean, I mean I find people in this world crazy. Or maybe I am crazy but I don’t think I’m crazy, I think people are crazy.’

Loving women has not changed Runia’s regard for family, though she has been wary of revealing this part of her identity to her relations. She does not doubt their love, but knows they are unfamiliar with woman-loving women. In Bangladesh, where gender divisions are everywhere, even on public buses, women can sleep with women and men can sleep with men free from the implication of sex. It is actually quite easy for same-sex couples to live together without suspicion, though awareness of homosexuality in Bangladesh is growing – as an example of a sinful Western attitude, rather than an acceptable identity. This stigma, explained Runia, is slowly disintegrating the safe ignorance surrounding same-sex loving people and now the difficulties are starting; their lives of are becoming obscure. Friendship between two women is acknowledged socially and culturally. Feeling affection for another woman, even sharing a bed with her, is acceptable, but anything more – sex and love and commitment – would be seen as a disaster.

Runia is certain her neighbours notice the arrival of Swaprova members with their cropped hair, trousers and shirts – not necessarily indicators of homosexuality but unusual in Bangladesh, where most women wear shalwar kameez and have flowing locks. The people who live in Runia’s building are educated and would not be unaware of same-sex relationships, yet no one has ever opposed Runia or made her life uncomfortable. ‘It is safe, this silence,’ Runia stated, though she also admitted the situation would have been different if her education, career and status were not as elevated, or if she did not own the apartment she lives in. As one who knows, Runia concluded how important it is to have power as a woman.

Knowing your identity is just as important and suddenly Runia noted I was not very clear about mine. Specifically, was I more comfortable with men or women in relationships?

So far it has been men, I told her, though relationships have always been a problem for me. This seemed to work well enough in Bangladesh, where, most of my lovers shared my desire not to engage in a lasting arrangement.

‘But the caring and sharing, the understanding,’ said Runia, ‘is what lasts the longest. That is nicer. What you’re doing now is difficult and sort of tiring, no? Having one after another and not getting satisfied.’

I explained that the question of a real relationship never surfaced and crossing

the extremes of culture never came up; that either dislike or incompatibility, or both in equal amounts, dulled every new passion. No desire ever lasted long.

‘Be careful, be careful,’ warned Runia, ‘otherwise you have to take the pain at last.’

My final taxi ride to Runia’s house left an imprint on my mind. My driver moved toward the cantonment, an area foreigners are barred from entering without a permit. When I protested that the guards would never let me through, the driver replied that, as a woman, I would not matter. He was right. The route revealed new sides of Dhaka: an Ayurvedic hospital, a house with walls covered in the draping fronds of pot plants, a district full of men and women tearing cotton down into strips for the mattress-makers of Nilkhet. I locked my eyes on the changing views, fearing that any detail I laid aside would prove significant later. Even then I realised the impossibility of recording everything I saw, heard and understood – or everything I didn’t – when I couldn’t even attempt a strict record of my own life.

Since our first meeting, Runia had shown me several different dimensions of her character. Some she described as ‘forming’ herself, others were transferred to her. Runia told me she began being, not just living, because of her parents, who were ‘beautiful people by their hearts’. When Runia was young she thought people could only learn through study and travel, but her father had naturally deep capacities for humanity, justice, kindness and beauty. Though it was not his profession, he served as a shalish in his local community and was respected in this role as arbitrator even beyond his district. Reflecting his love of nature, his garden at the front of Runia’s childhood home was so beautiful that the villagers referred to the house as Foolwala bari, the place of flowers; Hindu people were drawn to it during times of worship.

Runia’s description of her mother began with a sigh. She was, Runia said, a kind and good-hearted person but traditional in her values and duties as a woman. She served her family and submitted to her husband and other men, though always encouraged her husband to support their daughter’s mania for education. This sympathy faltered when Runia ran away from her first marriage, but did not altogether disperse. Although she lived with her sister in Dhaka following her first divorce, Runia often visited her parents in their village home, where, despite the slow process of healing, they began once more to see their daughter as part of themselves, with qualities they possessed.

So many young people I know seek the opportunity to leave Bangladesh in the name of their own advancement. My friend Sharma is one who wants to escape – not, as she says, for money and power in a different country, but because she wants a life where she can live more freely as a woman. Some people regard the social and political problems of the country, and the system that perpetuates them, as too deeply entrenched to ever change. Kichu korar nai is a well-used saying in Bangladesh, a voiced throwing up of the hands in the face of the seemingly insurmountable, about which there is Nothing To Do. Runia has little sympathy for those who run away from Bangladesh, who call their own country disgusting and unliveable. She declared this from the position of one who has studied abroad and returned with the intention of making her country better: ‘There are many, many odd things, but at the same time heh, if you run away, who will do this, who will clean the dirt? At least we should try, no?’

‘Runia Reflected: Talk Amongst Outsiders in Bangladesh.’ Kathryn Hummel. 
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 2, May 2014. 
After I departed Bangladesh, only to return a year later, I discovered that what I had written about Runia came nowhere near reflecting what I had learned. I considered Gourab’s doubtful words at the commencement of my research and questioned whether my understanding was indeed deep enough. Everything I read – all those good and useful books guarding against confusion – didn’t help. Because I had heard it all before, I ceased to read and accepted how few conclusions can be drawn around countries or people.

My thoughts remain with the process of listening – and my words in attendance to Runia’s own, strong voice. At the time of our final interview, I was reluctant to stop talking and start thinking about writing. Hoping to have my dawdling vindicated, I asked Runia how well she thought people ever know each other. Human beings are too mysterious to know deeply, she responded, and any assumption to the contrary can only lead to hurt, though it is a type of pain that shakes our inner belief in a good way. ‘You know,’ she went on, ‘life is divided into two parts. One that is real and happening and another that is your feeling inside and, I mean, something imaginary. And you feel, you think, that would have been very enjoyable but if really, exactly, if that happens to your life, you will not like it.’ It is in these particular words I now see a symbiotic flicker in the reflections of Runia and myself, at once inside and outside Bangladesh. From our different positions, it seems that both of us are seeking the same in people and countries – from our places outside, we are seeking the reflection of our longings.