

• WOMEN AND GENDER • THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE ISLAMIC WORLD •

Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond

Experiences and Images

Editors: **Haifaa Jawad & Tansin Benn**



BRILL

MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE UNITED KINGDOM
AND BEYOND

WOMAN AND GENDER

THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE ISLAMIC WORLD

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MARGOT BADRAN

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MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND BEYOND

Experiences and Images

BY

HAIFAA JAWAD AND TANSIN BENN



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FOREWORD

The role of women in Islam and the Muslim world is one of those issues which are a constant source of misunderstanding and sometimes ill will. Much has been researched and written about this, to the extent that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find an excuse for the generalisations and misconceptions which characterised the past. However, the same is not yet the case with the study of the situation of Muslim women in western Europe. Certainly a lot of valuable work has taken place but the rapidly changing nature of the subject quickly serves to make such work obsolete, even before anything like an overall picture has been achieved. The study of the situations, perceptions and expectations of Muslim women in western Europe is complicated by the change: the daughters of the immigrants now have their own children; many of them are in the employment market and many have been educationally successful. Their experiences growing up in Europe have meant that they have often had to respond directly to the encounters of tradition and modernity in more absolute forms than have their sisters in the Muslim world itself. They have also more directly and personally had to discover what scope and facilities Islam grants them in the face of cultural traditions which have subjected them. And they are having to do this in an environment where there is widespread racism and, more specifically, mistrust of Islam and Muslims. It is this situation of 'double jeopardy' which the papers in this volume deal with, making an important contribution to a subject which has implications for students of Islam, of Europe, of migration, of race and ethnic relations, and of gender studies.

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May 2002

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PREFACE

MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND BEYOND: SETTING THE SCENE

Tansin Benn and Haifaa Jawad

The terrorist atrocities carried out by radical Muslims in America on September 11th 2001 have highlighted the urgency to increase understanding and awareness of Islam and the experiences of Muslims throughout the world. The early backlash of attacks and abuse encountered by Muslims living in the United Kingdom, America, Australia, South Africa and Europe (Versi and Hussain, 2001; Allen and Nielsen, 2002), indicated spontaneous international reaction against the faith and its representatives. For example, the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) collated reports on the post September 11th situation, revealing widespread incidents of violent assault, verbal abuse and attacks on property of Muslim people. Muslim women were high amongst the victims of retribution, targeted because of their religious visibility. The hijab has become an embodiment of what is perceived, by some, as symbolic of both anti-western and anti-feminism views. There were many reports of Muslim women suffering verbal and physical assault.

Where the Muslim communities are more invisible, for example in Portugal and Luxembourg, there were low instances of aggression and violence, suggesting that visual indicators are highly significant in issues of cross-cultural integration.¹ This is significant to the book since the negative experiences of Muslim women, exacerbated by their religious visibility, form a central theme of the current research.

The first section of the preface outlines the key intentions of the book, explaining the significance of a text dedicated to the experiences of Muslim women in the West. The particular contribution of each chapter is synthesised to offer the reader a synopsis of the content that follows.

¹ (<http://eumc.eu.int/publications/terror-report/index.htm>).

The second section provides an overview of migration patterns by Muslims to the West, and the impact on the lives of Muslim women, in order to establish a foundation for the reader on which later chapters build. The main aim of the book is to raise consciousness of the day-to-day lived experiences of Muslim women in the United Kingdom and beyond, in the hope that greater sensitivity, understanding and accommodation of religious requirements will emerge.

Main Aim and Chapter Synopsis

It is an important time to address the issues encompassed in this book. In 1997 the Runnymede Trust produced a damning report 'Islamophobia—a challenge to us all', highlighting the prejudice and discrimination experienced by many British Muslims. The atrocities of 'ethnic cleansing', some of which target Muslim populations, suggest there are global issues surrounding the rights of Muslims. There is increasing interest in the role of religious understanding, social and political harmony, and in the rights of women. The position of Muslim women is crucial in this context.

Muslim women form a highly diverse and complex group and assumptions about them are often ill-conceived, mis-informed and grossly mis-represented. This is often reflected in images of them, particularly in the West, as oppressed, powerless and victimised. The voices of Muslim women, striving to keep their religious identity in Western contexts, are seriously under-represented in academic research. This book aims to re-dress the balance, to increase knowledge and understanding of the lived experiences of these women. The reciprocal benefits of making the experiences of this minority group more public will bring greater awareness and positive action related to their social, religious and political needs which will inform policy-makers, educators, employers, media representatives, and wider public opinion.

It is recognised that Muslim women do not form a simple homogeneous group, ensuring any approaches to research are challenging and complex. Diversity of experience will be related to different social, political and economic settings and to the interface of issues overlapping with the most obvious ones of gender and religion, such as class and age. Nevertheless, this is an important time to begin to undertake such a project of increasing understanding, as human rights issues gather momentum on a world stage.

This book provides a much-needed, and long-overdue resource that will be useful to anyone interested in issues of gender, religion and ethnicity, including students, employers, politicians and professionals. The book explores ways in which Muslim women are portrayed, alongside their experiences of being Muslim and part of a predominantly Western culture.

New perspectives are revealed with the help of the Muslim women volunteers who participated in the research underpinning the chapters in this book. Myths and misunderstandings about Muslim women are exploded. The selective representation of Muslim women in literature is challenged and their life-experiences are recounted, revealing struggle and non-acceptance, often related to dress codes and religious requirements. Here personal perspectives are offered which bring the issues alive. This book offers unique insights that challenge all of us to reflect on our own attitudes, values and behaviour, as they affect the lives of Muslim women.

Discriminatory experiences encountered by some Muslim women in Britain today are not new phenomena. In the first chapter Jawad, a Muslim woman living and working in Britain, sets the historical and contemporary context underpinning the position of Muslim women, essential to all other contributions in the book. From presenting current issues faced by Muslim women through integrating personal and vicarious experiences with documented encounters, Jawad moves on to deepen and broaden understanding of that picture by highlighting the complexity of key historical and contemporary factors contributing to the different experiences of Muslim women. The issues and themes that emerge are reinforced in all subsequent chapters, and are raised to increase understanding of the experiences of Muslim women with the intention of improving their position in the future.

In chapter two Donohoue Clyne offers a critique of the representation of Muslim women and Islam in so-called 'airport literature'. The role of these books and images in shaping public opinion and reinforcing negative stereotypes of women and Islam is highlighted, often portraying Muslim women as subservient, oppressed, exotic, victimised. The chapter contains analysis and critique of a range of texts scrutinising the roles of authors and ghostwriters, and their intentions and omissions. Most of the books failed to separate Islam from the various cultural practices that operate in different countries and to acknowledge the importance of the socio-political

context in the lives of Muslim women. For example, the dimensions of the veil exploited through the texts are interestingly juxtaposed with alternative accounts of meaning. In conclusion, Donohoue Clyne states, "Airport books, in fact, create a new kind of oppression of Muslim women in western societies through the images they promote. Whatever the stated purpose of the book, the reader (of airport literature) develops little understanding of women in Muslim societies but, rather, a sense of outrage at their treatment and all the stereotypes of Islam and Islamic cultures are reinforced".

In chapter three Haddad and Smith present an overview of the changing face of Islam in America, focusing on issues of diversity within the constituency of the Muslim community. The chapter offers depth and breadth of evidence in the struggle for identity as Muslims search for ways of living 'Islamically' and for answers to questions such as, 'What does it mean to be Muslim in contemporary American society?' Struggles for Muslim women in certain domains are identified, for example: modernization; patriarchy; education; 'Islamic dress'; marriage and polygyny, as are proactive strategies through which American Muslim women are challenging stereotypes and inappropriate legislation. Haddad and Smith conclude that: "Muslim women in America today are beginning to help carve a place for Islam. As community activists, professionals, teachers, lawyers and journalists, they are assuming a personal challenge to help the American public understand that, while practice often ranges widely from the ideal, the essential Islamic system is one that is advantageous for women."

Chapter four offers a view of the experiences of Muslim women in Sweden. The accelerated ethnic diversity of Sweden, evident towards the end of the twentieth century, is highlighted with examples of the influx of diverse groups of Muslims. These include: labour immigrants from Turkey, Yugoslavia, Albania and Pakistan; refugees from Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo; family members and, latterly, more refugees from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. The effect has been the need to re-assess 'Swedishness', identity and policy which Roald does from the perspective of gender equity and Sweden's policy on equal opportunity. The influence of class, paternalistic attitudes towards immigrant groups, struggles of homogeneity versus diversity, and concepts such as 'cultural creolisation' are explored throughout the chapter. Responses of the Muslim communities have been diverse, with separation for some (exacerbated by language difficulties) and more liberal integration for others. Key issues for Muslims living in Swedish

society include dress; the importance of family; interpretations of segregation in prayer and gender-relations, all of which sometimes create tensions with traditional 'western notions' of equal opportunities. The most influential spokeswomen are Swedish converts whose influence steers towards greater homogenisation, for example in terms of notions of gender equity, in line with Swedish tradition. Consequently, such ideals are incorporated into the Islamic framework. "As for Muslims, it is particularly those who play a part in wider society, in one way or another, who come to adapt 'Swedishness' to a greater or lesser degree, whereas those Muslims living in segregated areas tend to keep to patriarchal interpretations of socio-religious and political matters".

Experiences of 'new Muslim' women in Britain form the basis of chapter five. New Muslims are defined as those new to the Muslim community, respondents in this research being the first members of their families to embrace Islam. Haleem collates the findings of her pioneering 1980s research with subsequent studies, in particular, the research of Adnan (1996) into the experiences of over 100 new Muslims in Britain. Research outcomes are collated thematically. First, personal background and search factors are explored including answers to questions such as how and why individuals choose to become Muslim. The second theme explores the social consequences of making such a choice from the perspective of family, non-Muslim friends, in-laws, and repercussions of adopting an Islamic lifestyle, addressing issues such as prayer, dress, name, and education. The third theme explores the spiritual and social benefits perceived by the respondents, which revolve around feelings of spiritual fulfilment. The chapter concludes with a review of the benefits that new Muslims can bring to British society, for example: "... new Muslims can be bridge-builders between the cultures and peoples of East and West. They can be advocates, supporters and defenders of other Muslims at home and in the wider world, challenging ingrained prejudice and ignorance."

Irving, Barker, Parker-Jenkins and Hartas recount in chapter six a research project into careers agencies in England. The purpose was to establish the extent to which guidance offered to Muslim women towards the end of their schooling reflected understanding and accommodation of cultural-religious factors. The importance of supporting and promoting the career aspirations of young Muslim women within a context of social justice was seen as key to the

research. Barriers are identified such as unhelpful stereotypes, lack of recognition of rapidly changing beliefs and practices amongst young Muslims, and lack of information on religious affiliation in ethnic monitoring strategies. The research also identifies needs in relation to challenging the above, for example in re-writing equal opportunities policies which recognise and respect difference, training for careers staff, and activities targeting the Muslim community. Ways forward include increasing networking to include Muslim parents and families, the Muslim community, schools and colleges and employment providers. Findings indicate that good practice exists on the level of individual careers staff with experience of working with Muslim women, rather than being orchestrated at organisational level. There is a need to improve understanding and accommodation of the cultural-religious context if the career aspirations of young Muslim women are to be realised.

Chapters seven and eight address an important gap in a growing area of research into teachers' lives and careers by placing Muslim women at the centre of their explorations into life experiences and life histories. The chapters offer access to the experiences of Muslim women in their teacher-training and career phases, in England in the 1990s, and both were parts of larger, complex projects. Such research extends the debate beyond the previous focus on the years of compulsory schooling. Each chapter offers a different perspective, complementing understanding of barriers and their impact on the lives of Muslim women teachers.

Benn, in chapter seven, takes a process theory of identity as a framework for exploring ways in which key people, for example senior managers, colleagues, pupils and parents, influence the personal and professional development of the Muslim women. Using a case study approach it is clear that the women were differently affected and that those who wore the hijab met considerably more barriers than those who did not. Positive or negative experiences were dependent on the closed or open views of Islam held by those people most influential on their professional development. Unhelpful closed views were fuelled by stereotypical views of the religion and of Muslim women. Whilst some respondents enjoyed comfortable school environments in which they felt valued as Muslim women teachers, others had difficulty finding jobs and when they did they felt unwelcome, undervalued, and underused, often in situations where they shared religious and cultural identity with over 90% of the pupils. The women found different 'coping strategies' for their situ-

ations, including ‘stasis’ or retreating from any situations of potential conflict, emphasising different aspects of their multiple identities in school and home contexts, changing schools and even resignation where conflicts of conscience and loyalty became too much. The most important message emerging from this chapter is: “If respect and valuing of cultural diversity is to become a reality for children . . . it must first become a reality amongst the professionals.”

Osler, in chapter eight, takes an agency-structure approach, again using case studies, to focus on how life histories of Muslim women teachers highlight views of identity and citizenship. The latter is defined as first, the opportunity to participate fully and freely in the economic, social and public life of the local community and the nation, and second, ‘feelings’—a sense of belonging. Sample life history accounts of Salma, Yasmin and Neelum alongside other data from Muslim women are used to illustrate how Islamophobic discourses undermine their identities and citizenship rights and how the women are working to challenge racism, Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination and exclusion. A framework of questions drawn from the Runnymede Trust report (1997) on open and closed views of Islam is used to focus the analysis of the impact of Islamophobia on the lives of the Muslim women teachers. The discussion illustrates how Muslim women make connections within their own lives, how they perceive discrimination and attain self-understanding. Conclusions indicate that stereotypical, negative views of Muslims undermine both the identities and citizenship rights of all Muslims, particularly women “. . . since their voices are even less likely to find public expression than those of men.” Despite ways in which the Muslim women used their multiple identities to challenge situations, there is further need for dialogue and co-operation between Muslims and non-Muslims. “Particular attention needs to be given to the ways in which Muslim women may experience discrimination and exclusion from society, and the strategies which they have found effective in challenging such discrimination.”

Overview of Migration Patterns by Muslims to the West

Historically, Islam entered into many Western (European) countries long ago. Indeed interaction between Islam and the West is as old as Islam itself. From the beginning, traders and diplomats played a vital role in maintaining such contacts. Four distinct periods of Muslim

settlements in Europe can be identified. The first period was that in Sicily, Southern Italy and Spain, a phase which came to an end in the eleventh and fourteenth centuries respectively. All that is left is their monumental architectures. The second phase was the outcome of the take-over of the Mongol armies in the thirteenth century of the European part of the former USSR. Within a few generations, they managed to establish themselves, leaving in the process permanent Islamic presence in areas such as the Volga, Caucasus, and Crimea. With time, they also managed to spread their influence in areas such as Finland, Poland and Ukraine (Nielsen, 1992). The third phase started with the expansion of the Ottoman empire into the Balkans. This allowed not only for Muslims to settle permanently in the region, but also created an “indigenised” presence of Islam. In other words, Islam did not remain solely the religion of the conquerors; many of the native populations decided to adopt it (Nonneman, 1997). Hence, large permanent Muslim communities were created in countries such as former Yugoslavia, Albania (majority), and Bulgaria, but also smaller Muslim communities could be found in places such as Romania, Hungary, Greece and Poland (Vertovec and Peach, 1997).

During the above mentioned three phases of Muslim presence in Europe, Islam and Islamic civilisation made their impact on Europe and European culture. As Vertovec and Peach assert, “In addition to the ebb and flow of Muslim social and political presence over centuries, most notably in Spain, Sicily and the Balkans, facets of Islamic civilisation have come to imbue intellectual, artistic and other cultural properties in Western Europe—indeed, European civilisation itself” (ibid.:11).

Apart from the European continent, Islam made its way to the new world, namely the United States, where early Muslims, especially from Middle Eastern origins established themselves in the late 1800s (Haddad and Smith, 1994, 2002; Haddad, 2002). Since then American Muslims have increased in number and in 1991 were estimated at ten million, representing various “religious adherence, ethnic origin, occupation, education, wealth, social and political affiliations and degree of assimilation to American culture” (Muhammad, 1991: 439). Further insight into Muslims in America is offered in chapter three.

The fourth phase is a recent phenomena concerning essentially the so-called ‘new presence’ of Muslims primarily in West Europe, due mainly to immigration.

Muslims in West Europe

The new presence of Muslims in West Europe, which has attracted a lot of interest and attention for a variety of reasons came, in general, as a result of two waves of immigration, economic as well as political. The economic migration started in post World War Two and culminated during the 1950s and 1960s when Europe received a large number of labourers from Muslim countries who came purely for economic gain (Gerholm and Lithman, 1988). Post-war economic recession, compounded with indigenous labour shortage, encouraged Europe to recruit migrant labour from their former colonies who were allowed to settle without any restrictions. Thus, Britain, for example, recruited labourers from her Commonwealth countries, France looked to North Africa, while Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands sought labourers mainly from Turkey. Countries such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece did not encourage any labour migration for they were themselves labour suppliers. Having said that, however, many Muslim groups managed to find permanent places in these countries (Shadid and Koningsveld, 1995).

Economic migration is no longer the case, but it is the relatively new type of migration, mainly for political reasons, that has dominated the scene in most European countries recently. Muslims from various countries claiming refugee status and political asylum have entered into the European Union in recent years. Some escaped conflicts or radical Islamic/authoritarian regimes mainly in the Middle East, while others were displaced by the policies and strategies of "ethnic cleansing" that took place in the former republic of Yugoslavia. For example, since the fall of the Shah in Iran in 1979, the number of Iranians in Germany reached 90,000 in 1990, and 31,000 in Britain in 1991. The number of Iraqis in Britain reached 800,000 in the 1990s. In 1994 it was estimated that about half a million Yugoslav refugees were displaced to different parts of Europe (Vertovec and Peach, 1997).

In addition to the above mentioned waves of migration, there are small numbers of indigenous Muslims some are recent converts via marriages and missionary activities; others are direct descendants of convert people to Islam centuries ago and can be found only in Greece. Others, mainly in Spain: "... are recent converts but claim that their conversion to Islam is nothing but a rediscovery of their original roots" (Shadid and Koningsveld, 1995:2).

The different forms of immigration have led to the emergence of

substantial Muslim communities in various countries of the European Union. Currently, there are over seven million Muslims in West Europe. Their size, the history of settlement, cultural backgrounds, and national identities vary considerably from one country to another (Nonneman, 1997; Nielsen, 1992; Halliday, 1997; Vertovec and Peach, 1997). France, Britain and Germany have the largest concentration of Muslim communities. For example, in France Muslims are predominantly from North Africa, mainly Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. There are also sub-Saharan Africans, Turks, Pakistanis and French converts. The overall French Muslim population is higher than other European countries, estimated to be at around 3 million. This is because of the special relationship between France and its North African colonies, especially Algeria, where tighter constitutional attachment continued for a long time (Roy, 1994; Nielsen, 1992; Vertovec and Peach, 1997).

In Britain, although Muslims have been in the country for well over a century, especially in the form of foreign sailors who settled in port cities, it was not until the end of the Second World War that significant numbers of Muslims immigrated, settled and made their impact on British society (Vertovec, 1997; Husband, 1994). The post-war economy necessitated an import of foreign labourers from ex-colonies, especially the Indian Sub-continent, providing a ready source of labour. Hence, recruitment got underway by British employers and chain patterns of migration from the Sub-continent to Britain emerged among young men who came initially with the intention of earning money, supporting their families, investing in sources back home and, eventually, returning to their countries of origin. But government legislation in the 1960s, to try and control immigration from abroad, altered their strategies from temporary bases to permanent settlement. Consequently, during the 1960s and 1970s an influx of South Asian immigrants came to Britain creating, in the process, large immigrant communities. Estimates of the Muslim population in Britain are believed to be between 1 and 1½ million, nearly 80% of whom trace their origins to Pakistan, Bangladesh and India (Vertovec, 1997; Jacobson, 1998). Other groups are mainly Arabs, Turkish, Somalis (Halliday, 1992).

The Turks who came in huge numbers in the 1960s dominate the Muslim population in Germany. In 1961, the total number of Muslims in Germany was estimated to be 6,700. By 1990 the number was 1.67 million. Recent estimates put the figure at about two

million of whom 400,000 were of Kurdish origin. Other groups came mainly from countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Pakistan, and India. There are also about 5,000 German converts. In 1990, the overall Muslim population in Germany was believed to be over 2 million, about 80% being of Turkish backgrounds (Vertovec and Peach, 1997; Nielsen, 1992).

Other West European states have smaller but growing Muslim communities most of whom arrived in recent years for both economic and political reasons (see chapter four on Muslims in Sweden).

Migrant Muslim Women

Traditional gender role patterns in Muslim societies ensured that Muslim women rarely migrated alone for economic or other reasons. The migration of Muslim women, therefore, is linked organically with the migration of their male kin. This was achieved through a change in immigration law in Britain in 1962 that led to the reunion of the immigrant families, largely from the Indian sub-continent (for the Yemeni community women and children tended to arrive later in the 1980s). Similar patterns were established elsewhere in the European community in the early 1970s. In most European countries the early phase of immigration of Muslim peoples was characterised by male dominance with wives, daughters and mothers being left back home. Few managed to bring their families with them (Nielsen, 1992; Brah, 1994; Halliday, 1992). After the 1960s and 1970s, the immigration momentum started to gather pace and considerable numbers of Muslim women with their children started to arrive in the host countries to join their husbands and fathers increasing, in the process, the overall sizes of the Muslim family groups in the West. It is very difficult to estimate the exact number of Muslim women living in the West, especially if we include the new generation who have been born in the West. This is because there is no official data or any empirical research on this subject, largely attributable to 'religion' being omitted from national census data.

When women arrived in the host countries they faced many challenges and difficulties, some of these: "... were not specifically or uniquely linked to the move from the country of origin to Europe. They were as much the experiences of moving from village to city, and they would have been experienced in similar ways had the move

been from the Punjab to Karachi rather than (for example) to Birmingham” (Nielsen, 1992:99). This is quite evident given the fact that the majority of the immigrants, particularly in Britain, shared common rural roots. Other challenges were European related issues such as coping with loneliness, preserving kinship links with the country of origin, language difficulties (the majority of early immigrant women did not speak the language of the host nation), cultural adjustments and work opportunities (*ibid.*). With time, some of these shared difficulties have been dealt with others still need to be addressed.

Having reinforced the complexity of factors affecting Muslim women in the West, they do share some similar struggles and encounters as they seek to sustain their religion in essentially non-Muslim environments, as illustrated in the aftermath of the September 11th 2001 atrocities. This book explores many of these shared struggles and contributes a consciousness of the experiences of Muslim women that is intended to spread understanding in an increasingly globalized and sensitive world.

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CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES OF MUSLIM WOMEN LIVING IN THE WEST

Haifaa Jawad

Introduction

This book focuses on images and experiences of Muslim women in the West (the word 'West' has been used here in a wide sense to include the United Kingdom, Sweden, United States of America and Australia) and provides an opportunity for the voices of Muslim women to be heard. The intention in this chapter is to contextualise subsequent contributions by outlining an overview of the historical and contemporary position of Muslim women in western society. My own experiences as a Muslim woman,¹ teaching in Britain since 1989, have been both positive and negative. Personal experiences, observations and dialogue with fellow Muslim women over many years, indicate that elements of discrimination on the grounds of religion still exist. Multiple identities of diasporic Muslim women add complex overlapping layers of ethnicity, gender and religion, to interpretation and understanding of attitudes and behaviours encountered by Muslim women in western society. Personal and documented evidence indicates that inequitable treatment on religious grounds is real and identifiable in the lives of Muslim women, for example through incidents of violence, prejudice, discrimination and exclusion (Runnymede Trust, 1997:11). This is not to suggest that all Muslim women are victims of oppression, or experience uniform discrimination, but there is evidence that some do suffer from reactions to their religion, particularly those women who visibly display their Muslim affinity by wearing the hijab.

¹ I came to Britain in 1984 to conduct PhD research in Middle East politics, which was completed in 1989. Since then I have been teaching and researching various areas, among them, women's issues in Islam.

Encountering Muslim Women's Experiences in Britain

When we speak of Muslim women in the United Kingdom we need to remember that they are not a homogenous group. In fact, they constitute a very heterogeneous category of people with different cultural backgrounds. Apart from a sizeable number of British women who converted to Islam, the majority of Muslim women have come from different parts of the world, from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Middle East, including Turkey and Iran and North Africa. These women are differentiated in a variety of ways. For example, there are at least four major linguistic groups: Bengali, Urdu, Turkish and Farsi. Economic and educational backgrounds vary. Some, especially women who have come from the Indian subcontinent, are predominantly peasants or working class, and thus are illiterate or semi literate, while others come from middle-class families with rich educational backgrounds and professional skills. Religious sects also bring differences within Muslim groups, mainly, but not solely, between Sunnis and Shias, the two main sects in Islam. Their cultures, traditions, gender systems and political associations are distinctive and play a role in their overall life circumstances (Brah, 1992).

Personal experiences shared during my career in Higher Education over the last nine years with students, colleagues and female Muslim friends, support documented evidence which suggests that some Muslim women experience double oppression from the culture of their community as well as the culture of their religion: "...our parents' traditional attitudes... their cultural values, their family honour, their stubbornness to let go of the traditions that do not do anything for anyone living in Britain. If a girl stands up for her rights she brings shame on the family. These old fashioned ideas are what oppress Muslim girls not Islam" (Yaqub, 1998:12).

Some have expressed concern at their struggle to maintain an education. This was confirmed at a private seminar which took place at the offices of the Institute of Public Policy research on May 26, 1999, when figures were produced by a police officer illustrating "... how 1000 Muslim boys and girls had been traced through the education system from birth in 1980. At schooling for children aged 4-9 and 9-13 there were 1000 boys and 1000 girls, however in the age group 13-18, whilst there were still 1000 boys, 370 girls had "disappeared" from school rolls" (Sheriff, 1999:5). Abstracting girls from their right to education has had serious consequences on

the overall quality of education of women within the Muslim community in Britain.

Women are discouraged from continuing in education, especially Higher Education. Female education is constrained by social customs rather than governed by the Islamic principles on knowledge and education. Traditionally, maintaining the home and the family has taken precedence over women's right to education in Muslim communities (Jawad, 1991). Female education is viewed as a threat to the traditional customs and way of life of the community. Educated women are viewed with suspicion, their ability to challenge tradition does not appeal to some men who expect women to be subservient and obedient. An illustration of this can be seen in a personal encounter when the husband of a female student came to me, as tutor, complaining that I was causing his family to break up, saying: "... you are teaching our women their rights and encouraging them to rebel against the status quo ...". These attitudes are counter to those which underpin Muhammad's views on female education in which both are equally encouraged to acquire knowledge "... from the cradle to the grave" (Jawad, 1991:12; Mirza, 1989).

It is not all bleak as Government directives and some universities have designed courses that target the Muslim community, such as the former Bachelor of Education (BEd) teacher training degree with Islamic studies as a major subject, at the former University of Birmingham, Westhill and subsequent BA degrees offering wider study of Islam and related issues, such as Women in Religion, in the same institution. Increasing numbers of Muslim women have been attracted into these courses. This is not to suggest that tensions do not arise. Evidence suggests that staff and students experience tensions as institutions address different cultural and religious needs, and move towards accommodation (Benn, 1998).

Muslim women have encountered difficulties when entering the world of work. For example some have found it harder than their non-Muslim peers to succeed in achieving their career goals (Parker-Jenkins *et al.*, 1998). It is claimed that Muslim girls often face problems during career advice interviews when they are directed towards 'girlie' courses such as textiles and home economics rather than choices in the sciences, maths or English (*ibid.*). In later chapters within this book Benn and Osler expand on the difficulties experienced by Muslim women entering and staying in their teaching careers. Muslim women sometimes also face discrimination at work.

There are documented cases which show that Muslim women have been sacked or dismissed simply because they wear the hijab (Versi, 1998). Having said that, however, there are signs of improvement on this front and a few unfair dismissals have recently won legal cases on the grounds of discrimination. More positively, on 24th April, 2001, the Metropolitan police “announced . . . that it was introducing the hijab in its service as a uniform option for Muslim women” and “setting up prayer rooms in police stations and providing halal food in staff canteens” (Adil, 2001:9).

It needs to be acknowledged that Muslim women have achieved high status in professions such as medicine and law, sometimes fighting prejudice, for example against the wearing of the hijab and against the powers of patriarchy both within the local Muslim community and the host society. An example of patriarchy in the Muslim community was highlighted in a recent report: “. . . I do feel strongly that much needs to be said about the way some of our men treat their women. Their behaviour and language is appalling, and their abuse of Islam is frequent and shocking” (The Muslim News, 2000:5). Under such circumstances, Muslim Asian women tend to lose their self esteem, self-respect and self-confidence. I can still remember the day when one of my female Muslim students came to my office asking me to help her to build up some confidence: “teach me to be as confident as you are” she said, an example of mental and emotional vulnerability.

The issue of forced marriages within the Asian community is a concern for many, including Government, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Forced marriage is a clear violation of women’s human rights; it constitutes a form of domestic violence and/or child abuse. Consequently, it “. . . cannot be regarded as a cultural practice that has to be respected and tolerated. Nor is it sufficient to allow (communities) where the practice exist to police themselves” (Southall Black Sisters Report, 2000:1). It must be stressed that there is a difference between forced marriage which lacks free consent and arranged marriage where both parties give their free consent. Although men can be forced into unwanted unions, the problem essentially affects women, especially very young women (ibid.).

Within my own Higher Education context three students have recently come to me for guidance and support when faced with forced marriages, returning to Pakistan and interrupting their uni-

versity studies. The expectation of submission and adherence to cultural tradition is detrimental to the life-chances of Muslim women. Marriage is always presented as an exclusive parental choice, while women's feelings, wishes and happiness are very often ignored. Islam advocates women's choice in marital decisions, illustrating tension between religious and community guidance for some Muslim women (Jawad, 1998).

It would appear that the incidence of forced marriages is increasing since the removal of the primary purpose immigration rule. This trend is detrimental to a positive integration of the community with the host society. Home Office sources illustrate that the application for visas for husbands increased from 255 in 1997 to 1,132 in 1998 (Alibhai-Brown, 1998). In 1999, the SBS (Southall Black Sisters) "... handled 31 cases and 82 one-off enquiries on women seeking help to escape forced marriage alone" (the SBS report 2000:2). In 2000 the Foreign Office and the police investigated 200 cases of forced marriages amongst British Muslim women (British Muslims Monthly Survey, 2001:5). In all forced marriages women are uprooted, and suffer physically, emotionally and mentally. They are often compelled to abandon their life choices in education and careers. As one community leader suggested, this is defended on the basis of safeguarding the women's 'best interests': "... we would prefer them to lose out in this world than to lose out in the Hereafter" (cited in Lewis, 1994:194).

Further tensions can arise in the area of divorce for Muslim women. When marriages breakdown women are often abandoned and find it difficult to get divorced. This could be a consequence of the fact that, in Islam, men have the right for instant divorce while women have a longer path as applications and justifications have to be made before divorce can be granted (Jawad, 1998). A recent study (and probably the first of its kind on the subject) has revealed that increasing numbers of Asian Muslim women are seeking divorce from their husbands. This is done via the Muslim Law (Shariah) Council, UK, (MLSC(UK)), a voluntary organisation based in London. According to this study, it is estimated that over 350 cases of marital disputes are referred to (the Council) every year; 25% of the Council's clients are women within the first year of their marriages. The MLSC consists of imams (authoritative religious figures) and fuqaha (jurists) from the whole of the United Kingdom and they represent the five major

schools of Islamic law (namely Hanafi, Maliki, Shafai, Hanbali and Ja'fari). The primary purpose of the Council is to help divorce procedure according to Islamic law (Shah-Kazemi, 2001).

Often, when divorce is successful, Muslim women find themselves isolated with virtually no support from their family or community. Muslim women facing difficulties generally tend to suffer in silence, perhaps for social, family and financial reasons. Sometimes Imams are unsympathetic and the women turn to Muslim female activists and Muslim women's organisations such as the Muslim women's helpline and An-Nisa society, both of which are based in London. While these organisations do offer help and counselling they are generally ill-equipped because of lack of resources and trained staff. At the national level Islamic organisations have often ignored the difficulties of Muslim women, since this remains largely a taboo subject, and such organisations are usually male-dominated (Yaqub, 1999).

The situations described above are not new but are rooted in history and are the product of a complex interplay of social, political, economic, geographic and religious factors. The remainder of the chapter will trace a historical and contemporary overview of the experiences of Muslim women in western society, with particular emphasis on Britain. The purpose is to offer historical understanding, which is essential to interpretation of today's events, such as those recounted above and in the rest of the book.

Muslim Women in the West: Stereotyping Islam, the Early Roots

Western negative attitudes towards Islam are as old as Islam itself. Suffice it to say that, from the beginning, Western (European) reaction to the emergence of Islam was hostile. This hostility was, in part, the result of a sense of fear that was rooted in ignorance "... Christians were ignorant of Islam, at least in part, because Christendom, prompted by *odium theologicum*, had no desire to understand or tolerate Islam" (Savory, 1976:127). The decision to remain ignorant about Islam was a conscious one for, up until the seventeenth century, Islam represented a constant threat to Europe and so Christendom had to be defended by denigrating and placing the enemy (Islam) in an unfavourable light. As such, negative images of Muhammad were fabricated and alien practices, which run contrary to the Islamic belief system, were invented and attributed to Islam and Muhammad

with little care for accuracy (Esposito, 1995). Guinert of Noget captured public opinion behind such sentiments when he claimed of Muhammad that: “. . . it is safe to speak evil of the one whose malignity exceeds whatever ill can be spoken of” (Buaben, 1997:6).

The basis of such an apocalyptic view of Muhammad and Islam was laid down by John of Damascus who announced “. . . Islam to be a pagan cult, the Ka’aba in Makkah an idol, and the prophet Muhammad an irreligious and licentious man” (Sardar and Davies, 1990:35). His writings were to become a term of reference for all Christian polemic writings on the subject; it also set the way for Christian onslaughts on Islam and its prophet, especially during the medieval era (Daniel, 1993). Stories and fables were invented to discredit Muhammad and his religion. For example, he was called the impostor, identified with the antichrist and viewed as the Devil’s son and the Devil incarnate (Bennett, 1992), portrayed as an epileptic, a magician and a sorcerer, who sanctioned sexual indulgence for his followers (Armstrong, 1995). Dante in his *Inferno* “. . . consigned Muhammad and his disciple Ali with their bodies split from head to waist, to the eighth circle of Hell” (Reeves, 2000:93). The religion of Islam was regarded as a form of heresy derived from Christian principles which the monk, Bahira, was forced to teach to Muhammad and was labelled as the religion of force which used violence to win converts (Robinson, 1994). This negative attitude was “reactive” as Islam, at the time, posed genuine strategic, theological and economic threats to the West (Kabbani, 1989).

Contemporary Western Images of Islam and Muslim Women

Despite the longstanding conflict between the two sides, they managed, at intervals, to coexist and even co-operate. In recent decades, however, a dislike of Islam and Muslim culture has again crept into Western perception. Some Muslim observers have noted “. . . a distinct form of prejudice and fear framed within the socio-political and socio-cultural fabric of (Western) society . . . There is a move towards what is not so much colour racism but cultural racism and indeed religious racism” (Mian, 1997:1). As an identifiable group, Muslims have become more visible in the aftermath of the Rushdie Affair in 1989, the Gulf war in 1990, and more recently September 11th 2001. Consequently, there has been a trend towards presenting Islam

and Muslims as a problem for the West. For example, Islam is at times portrayed as “violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism and engaged in a clash of civilisation” (Runnymede Trust, 1997:5). Hence, Muslims are perceived as a threat to Western culture and society. The idea of Islam as a threat to national security is at times reinforced also at the international level “. . . Muslim fundamentalism, said Willy Claes, the former General Secretary of NATO, is at least as dangerous as communism once was. Please do not underestimate this risk . . . at the conclusion of this age it is a serious threat because it represents terrorism, religious fanaticism and exploitation of social and economic justice” (ibid.:9). Even though most European governments condemned his comments, they would appear to reflect an attitude found more widely. For example, such reactionary comments have appeared more recently following terrorist acts such as the Oklahoma bombing and the September 11th catastrophe, although withdrawn immediately. This view of Islam has been triggered by two factors.

The first is the growing number of Muslim immigrants living in the West, mainly due to migration although there are numbers of indigenous converts. Currently there are sizeable Muslim communities in, for example, Britain, France, Germany and other European countries (Nonneman *et al.*, 1997 and Nielsen, 1995). The exact number is difficult to state, but rough estimates indicate that there are over 3 million Muslims in France (two thirds originating in North Africa); over 1 million in Britain (two thirds from the Indian sub-continent); and about 1.8 million in Germany, predominantly from Turkish and Kurdish backgrounds. The total number of Muslims in Western Europe is therefore estimated to be between 6 to 10 millions (Nonneman *et al.*, 1997; Nielsen, 1995; Halliday, 1995).

The presence of such a large number of Muslim minority groups has certainly strained the social fabric of countries such as, for example, France and Britain, where Islam is regarded as the second and third largest religion respectively. Anti-Muslim feeling has risen culminating, on occasions, in clashes between indigenous groups and Muslim communities over issues such as immigration, citizenship and the need to adapt Muslim beliefs and practices. To some extent and more so in Central/Eastern Europe than in West Europe or America, past memories of Christian Europe fighting against Muslim armies trying to take over the continent are linked to “. . . demographic and political realities . . . and fears of the expansion of a

resurgent Islam in Europe and America” (Esposito, 1999:96–97). The recent resurgence in anti-immigrant sentiments have led countries such as France, Britain, The Netherlands and Denmark to introduce tough measures on immigration. This is done in an attempt to deny the far right any opportunity to gain ground at the popular level as has happened recently in France.

This concern has been fuelled not only by the fact that Islamic fundamentalism has appeared to gain support at Europe’s back door, but also by the growing interest, especially among young European and American Muslims, in issues relating to the Muslim community world-wide (Esposito, 1999; Nielsen, 1998). An example of this can be seen in the recent anti-Taliban war when American and British Muslims chose to fight in Afghanistan, indicating the possible radicalisation of Muslim groups living in Europe and the US. This international aspect is the second key factor. Current Islamic revivals are taking place throughout the Muslim world, which are often linked to the Iranian revolution of 1979 with its images of irrational and outdated clergy-men, and women covered with black cloaks from head to foot (El-Solh and Mabro, 1994). Muslim women, in the Western mind, “. . . all too often tend to conjure up a vision of heavily veiled, secluded wives, whose lives consist of little more than their homes, their children, and the other women in the harem or immediate kinship circle” (ibid.:4). Frequently, Western media commentators claim that Islam oppresses women in ways significantly different and worse than the ways women of other faiths and cultures are treated: “. . . Moslems everywhere behave with equal savagery. They behead criminals, stone to death female—only female—adulterers, throw acid in the faces of women who refuse to wear the chador, mutilate the genitals of young girls . . . Islam treats women as second-class citizens” (Daily Express, January 16th 1995, cited in Runnymede Trust, 1997:26).

Some Western voices are not even prepared to put Islam in the same rank as other religions as far as gender issues are concerned. When the Egyptian feminist al-Sadaawi stated that all religions are equally oppressive and patriarchal in their treatment of women, she incurred the wrath not only of the Liberals, but also of Christian and Jewish feminists who accused her of gross misjudgement of the historical development of other faiths. This does not come as a surprise, for Islam is believed by many in the West to be “. . . the symbol of the subordination of women par excellence” (Kingston, 1995:1).

Hence, Muslim women are often perceived as invisible human beings with no use or value to their society; they are portrayed as passive, submissive, inactive and highly dependent on others. All this is in contrast to images of the highly independent, educated, liberated Western women. Would the same obtain if these women were Jews or Christians? What makes the images of Muslim women so special and highly controversial?

Factors affecting Western Perceptions of Muslim Women

There are many factors that have influenced the Western view of Muslim women. One of the most important has been a tendency to lump Muslim women into one large group and view them as homogeneous clones of one another (Ashraf, 1999), leaving aside the geographical, political, social, theological and historical factors that shape their lives in different parts of the world. This attitude overlooks the variety of Muslim women around the globe and the different treatments they receive in their respective countries. For example, there are ways in which British Muslim women are the same as, but different from, Pakistani women who are, in turn, different from Iranian women. In these countries and others, women's lives are largely affected by the customs and government policies prevailing in the area; which might work in favour or against them. Rana Kabbani explains this by pointing out that in the Muslim world ". . . no homogeneous oppression exists, since the interpretation of the religious texts differs widely and since practices that are unthinkable in one Muslim country are often common in another (and this for political, not religious, reasons)". She continues: ". . . in fact, in Islamic society, as in the West, the oppression of women is usually more the result of poverty and lack of education and other opportunities than religion" (Kabbani, 1989:16). Similarly, G. Munoz asserts that: ". . . Western societies have been misinformed and become biased to such an extent that they cannot, or will not, understand that the problem of women in Islam is not a religious but a social issue, that is religion being used by a patriarchal society" (Munoz, 1999:13).

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that there are still key aspects of Islamic law that are seriously affecting Muslim women's rights. For example, little has been changed regarding issues such as marriage, divorce, polygamy, sexuality and family honour (al-Hibri, 2000).

As Moghissi asserts “. . . Islamic societies, with some exceptions, over the centuries, disclose greater similarities than differences in their rigidity regarding the treatment of women, particularly in the area of women’s legal rights pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance, (and) custody—all of which define and confine women’s participation in social and political activities” (1999:19).

The patriarchal, socially conservative, interpretation of these issues, rather than Islam *per se*, is certainly responsible for many of the contemporary problems facing Muslim women in both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds and, despite the various attempts to reform these laws, little has been achieved to eradicate women’s legal disabilities in marriage and divorce. Yet this is by no means confined to Islam alone; other religions such as Judaism face similar problems. For example, the patriarchal interpretation of Judaism has also affected the life of Jewish women, especially in the area of family relations. As Greenberg says “. . . honesty bids us (to) acknowledge that Jewish women . . . face inequality in (many areas of Community life). Jewish divorce law, for instance, requires that a husband writes and delivers a get (a bill of divorce) to his wife in order for the marriage to be terminated. The effect is that the wife becomes dependent on the will of the husband in matters of divorce” (Greenberg, 1981:6; Swidler, 1976; Plaskow, 1990).

Such undeniable problems in parts of the Muslim world have fed Western stereotypical perceptions, helping to perpetuate the negative images of Muslim women. Very often, Western media latch on to selective examples of unjust treatment and generalise them to include all Muslim women. Islam is often branded as a backward and fundamentalist religion, especially in its treatment of women. The same cannot be said with regard to Jewish and Christian women. For example, a French woman would not be classified with a Mexican woman although both may be Roman Catholics and hold the same belief system (Ashraf, 1999), while, in the case of Muslim women, this does often happen. This reinforces the already distorted images of Muslim women.

A second main factor is that some of the old colonial images of Muslim women (projected at the end of the eighteenth century) linger on in Western society today. When European powers ruled over the Muslim world they brought with them a civilising mission which emphasised the superiority of Western culture and the inferiority of Eastern, especially Muslim culture. This sense of superiority was

extended to the treatment of women. "I am here to liberate Muslim women, I am here to liberate them from Islam" said Lord Cromer of Egypt, and to be liberated meant that Muslim women had to cast off everything Islamic and adopt a Western way of life. That was precisely the core of the European civilising mission. This mission, argues Rana Kabbani, continues to colour contemporary Western perceptions of Muslim women because it has been taken over and reinforced by main-stream Western feminism (Kabbani, 1992).

Most Western feminists continue to propagate that, in order for Muslim women to be successful and earn status and respect from Western feminism, they must throw off their religious culture in its entirety and embrace whole-heartedly the Western way of life (Kabbani, 1986). As such, they have applauded the secular "Muslim" feminists who have managed to get rid of their "horrific" religious heritage. Munoz asserts "... Only Western-inspired feminist movements in Muslim countries have been regarded as credible in Europe while little credibility is extended to other means of breaking away from the traditional order, such as used by Islamist women" (1999:13).

Similarly, al-Hibri says "... feminist critiques tend to be motivated more by a feeling of superiority and a desire for cultural hegemony than by a desire to help the other (in this case the Muslim woman). These Western "liberators" have taken it upon themselves to explain, redefine and prioritise the demands of Muslim women over these women's objections . . . they have even selected and funded some secular "Muslim" women to act as spokeswomen for the rest of the Muslim women . . . (this) attack on Islam has adversely impacted on the civil rights of Muslims in Western countries and has poisoned the well for Muslim women seeking to regain their rights in their own societies. Unfortunately, this state of affairs has alienated many Muslim women from the Western feminist movement" (2000:67-68). This trend not only reinforces the old colonial images of Muslim women, but it also obscures the reality of their situation.

A third factor, already alluded to above, is that secular feminists have not helped the images of Muslim women. Certainly, secular feminists have highlighted the abuses that are taking place in certain parts of the Muslim world and, for this, they have to be commended. But the way they have done it raises serious questions regarding the practicality of their methods. When these writers and activists dealt with women's issues, they decided to follow the Western path as role model, the movement for the "liberation of Muslim

women has indeed borrowed many characteristics of Western women's lives. The first gesture of liberated Arab women was to discard the veil for Western dress" (Mernissi, 1985:167). Content with this model, they have decided to reject "... all considerations of religion in the discourse over women's human rights. In their quest for rights they have become pro-Western and anti-tradition even though they fail to distinguish between lived Islam, the intellectual legacy of the Muslims, and Islam as a reflection of the primary sources" (Wadud, 2000:8). Indeed, some have publicly declared that the Islamic discourse is the only threat to women's rights (Munoz, 1999).

In addition, secular feminists tend to ignore the relevance of issues such as the centrality of Islamic spirituality or Islam as an issue of identity to Muslim women. Very often, they are content with accepting Western understandings of rights, liberty, and freedom. When they address the violation of women's rights in the Muslim world they address them in the light of standards of measurement that are alien both to the Islamic cultural ethos as well as its primary sources. And "although these standards are promoted as "universal", they continue to support other ethnic, class, and gender-based stereotype" (Wadud, 2000:8-9). In doing so, they appear to some, especially in the Muslim world, as deconstructionists, whose aim is to confuse the central issue and help, consciously or otherwise, to undermine the position of Muslim women by giving them a misleading representation.

Fourthly, Western perceptions of the "veil"² as a symbol of women's suppression have partially contributed to the problematic view of Muslim women. The popular Western media represent Islam as a religion which forces women into hiding and seclusion. Indeed, the forced covering of women that took place both in Iran in 1979, and Afghanistan under the Taliban in 1997, lends credibility to this assumption. There is no doubt that forced veiling among Muslim women does take place, but this is only one aspect of the whole phenomenon, for, in contrast, there are numbers of Muslim women

² The word veiling does not reflect accurately the varieties of covering. For example: "Hijab, an Arabic term from the root 'hajaba' meaning to cover, conceal, hide, is a complex notion encompassing action and apparel. It is also the name given to the headscarf, or any kind of covering for the body. It also denotes a general attitude of modesty. It applies to men as well. Niqab is the name of the face veil". See K. Bullock, "Challenging Media Representations of the Veil: Contemporary Muslim Women's Re-veiling Movement", 'The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences', Vol. 17, No. 3, Fall 2000, p. 48.

who have voluntarily decided to don the veil both in the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. For those women the experience of covering is positive rather than negative (Bullock, 2001). As Macleod states, "... Western assumptions that the veil automatically means subjection and limitation, or a return to a restrictive or medieval version of the Islamic religion must be questioned in the face of these large numbers of intelligent, often educated and modernised women who choose voluntarily to put on this dress" (Macleod, 1991:104).

There are many reasons which have been given for this voluntary covering, ranging from political, religious, access to public sphere, to statement of personal identity (Bullock, 2001). The popular assumption that associates the veil with violence or oppression often creates an uncomfortable, even hostile, environment for Muslim women living in the West. "People just do not treat you the same once you start to cover your hair. They try and cheat me out of change. They think I am a foreigner, and I have been here for a long time. I wear (Western) clothes, but I wear a scarf. The scarf changes everything" (Ashraf, 1999). Moreover, there is evidence that women with covered hair have been spat on, denied service and had their scarves pulled off (Runnymede Trust, 1997).

Many factors contribute to the detriment of Muslim women living in the West. They have been caught between a host nation (both state and society) which is apathetic to their religion and culture. 'Ghettoisation' of Asian Muslim communities led, in 2001, to large-scale religious and racial, predominantly male, violence in Bradford, Blackburn, Burnley and Oldham. More recently, following September 11th 2001, a backlash against Muslims took place in Britain and other Western countries. The negative repercussions on images and experience of Muslim women are inevitable. The causes for such outpourings of intolerance are complex but lack of understanding of religion and culture contribute to the ignorance that fuels these tensions (Allen and Nielsen, 2002).

Summary

Complex overlapping historical, political, social and economic factors contribute to the disadvantaged position of Muslim women in the West. Tensions arise for Muslim and non-Muslim communities when ignorance and division of groups prevents mutual understanding

and harmony. The position of some Muslim women is further exacerbated by cultural and religious isolation and the double-bind situation of perpetuating tradition and meeting the challenges of living in non-Muslim societies. In this chapter, predominantly negative life experiences of Muslim women living in Britain have been underpinned with broader historical and contemporary dialogue about Muslim women living in the West. The purpose has been to add to the call for greater awareness, understanding, equality and social justice for Muslim women. These themes will be further developed in subsequent chapters.

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CHAPTER TWO

MUSLIM WOMEN: SOME WESTERN FICTIONS

Irene Donohoue Clyne

Introduction

One of the most commonly used images in western representations of Islam and Islamic culture is the veiled woman. There are two other stereotypical images to be noted—the bearded fundamentalist Islamic terrorist and Muslim men at prayer always photographed from the rear at the moment of prostration, which appear in the media and reinforce the “otherness” of Islam. Interestingly, it is difficult to find equivalent images which so clearly identify the followers of the other two monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity. However, it is the use of the image of the veiled Muslim woman in popular literature, which will be examined here. A Muslim woman wearing a head-scarf or *hijab* (or one of the cultural variations of Islamic dress) seems to attract interest which is a mixture of fear and fascination. The religious reasons for wearing *hijab*, identified by Barazangi (1989:71–2) as modesty, privacy and protection, are rarely understood by non-Muslims. Among Muslims, the *hijab* is a subtle form of non-verbal communication, which conveys a number of messages about a woman’s religious behaviour, perhaps her social status or political beliefs and cultural background. But in the non-Muslim world, the veil is generally interpreted using western cultural values, which assume that veiled Muslim women are oppressed while veiled Christian women such as members of religious orders or wearers of the traditional bridal or widow’s veil are not.

The decision to wear *hijab* is a complex one involving not only religious beliefs but also social, cultural and political consequences as recent events in France and Turkey, which link wearing of *hijab* to participation in education, clearly demonstrate (Kepel, 1997; Smucker, 1998). Questions of personal choice versus compulsion in relation to wearing *hijab* are also important considerations. Some Islamic scholars argue that there can be no coercion in religion, and that the Qur’anic injunction to men and women to dress modestly

(Qur'an: Surah 24:30–1) permits women to decide for themselves about covering their heads (Badawi, 1996:96). As Ahmed (1992:152) recognises, in western societies the image of *hijab* or the veil has acquired a symbolic function, as “the most visible marker of the differences and inferiority of Islamic societies . . . a symbol now of both the oppression of women . . . and the backwardness of Islam”. It is these limited and ethnocentric images of the veil when used in western fiction that are the focus of this chapter.

A Definition: Airport Literature

The representation of Muslim women and Muslim culture in “airport literature” provides the context of this study. Airport literature is used here to refer to those popular paperback books frequently, though not exclusively, sold in airport book-shops and therefore intended to entertain the traveller rather than for serious study. Occasionally more serious academic books or books by acclaimed authors share the shelves with these popular titles. However, the influence of such “airport literature” should not be underestimated for, together with television news and films, they are an important means of shaping public opinion and providing information about the Muslim world and Islam. Airport books are distinguished by two main characteristics: an eye catching cover and effective marketing. Firstly, since they are usually displayed with the cover facing the potential purchaser, this cover must be sufficiently arresting for the purchaser, contrary to folk wisdom, to judge the book by its cover. Secondly, since there is competition from hundreds of other paperbacks, many by well-known authors, and the decision to purchase must often be made quickly, something exotic or slightly provocative must appear on the cover, in the title or advertising blurb of the book. Such books are sometimes referred to as “airport books”. Most of the books cited here were purchased by this writer in the past few years whilst travelling. References are made to the edition purchased, although this generally is a reprint. Some older and possibly now out-of-print books with similar themes have been included for the purpose of comparison.

Another significant feature of these books about women’s experiences in Muslim countries is their volume of sales. Mahmoody’s book

about her experiences of escaping from Iran following the breakdown of her marriage, *Not without my daughter* was first published in 1988 and was in its seventeenth reprint by 1994. It sold ten times as many copies in Germany as in the USA and triggered according to Leug (1995:19) a wave of publications on the life of women in Islamic countries, the more dramatic and brutal the story the better. No doubt the film of the book stimulated sales of this book. *Sold* (Mushen & Crofts, 1995) Mushen's account of being sold by her father into a forced marriage in North Yemen written with the assistance of a ghost writer and first published 1991, was the best selling non-fiction book in France in 1992. It has been translated into eighteen languages and was in its tenth reprint by 1995. Interest in this story has been sufficient to ensure that her mother's story, *Without Mercy: a mother's struggle against modern slavery* (Ali & Wain, 1999, first published in 1995) has been reprinted five times. Similarly Sasson's book *Princess* (first published in 1992) has generated a number of sequels, *Daughters of Arabia* (1994) and *Desert Royal* (1999). All are still on sale, indicating that interest in such airport literature has not waned, despite the proliferation of these books. *Not without my daughter*, *Princess* and *Sold* have become the standard of success against which many of the other books are measured. Clearly such paperbacks are profitable for publishers who use cross-marketing, with authors such as Mahmoody providing recommendations for other books. Her recommendation for *Princess* was printed inside the cover of Sasson's *Desert Royal* (1999):

Heart-wrenching. It is a well-written, personal story. It had to come from a native woman to be believable. Betty Mahmoody, author of *Not without my daughter*.

Such recommendations are easily arranged by a shared publisher. So Sasson repays by recommending Khashoggis' novel *Mirage* as—“one of those rare books on the Middle Eastern women that is lively, provocative and thought provoking” inside Khashoggis' latest novel *Nadia's song* (2000). Similarly *Price of Honour* (Goodwin, 1995) advertises *Sold* (Muhsen, 1991), and *My Feudal Lord* (Durrani, 1994) advertises *Daughter of Persia* (Farmaian, published 1992) to ensure that interest in such stories is maintained.

In airport bookshops these books tend to be shelved together: fiction, autobiography and journalistic reports. For example *Not without*

my daughter, (Mahmoody, 1994) which is an authentic autobiography, is shelved alongside books such as *Mirage* (Khashoggi, 1996) a book that declares itself to be a work of fiction:

this passionate, spellbinding story of one young women's fight for freedom . . . exposes the reality of life behind the veil for women in today's harems . . .

and *Nine Parts of Desire* (1995) journalist Brooks' series of interviews with Muslim women and *Aman* (1995) the oral history of a Somali woman, reported to anthropologist Virginia Lee Barnes. These books, however, share an important characteristic because they are generally presented as being autobiographical with the personal voice of the author relating her own experiences, the inclusion of intimate details and the evocation of memories, particularly those of smell and taste, to draw the reader into the story. But the use of ghost writers is also a common device to ensure that the dramatic or emotional impact of the story is maximised, especially if the author is poorly educated (Mahmoody & Hoffer, 1994, Mushen & Crofts, 1995, Ali & Wain, 1999, Kassindja & Bashir, 1999, Dirie & Miller, 2000). However, they are marketed because of their sensational revelations or exotic setting, rather than their documentary strength or the importance of the subject of the biography. This was recognised by the authors of *Sold* (Mushen & Crofts, 1995) who wrote "this is the story of an ordinary girl with extraordinary courage and tenacity . . . caught up in extraordinary events". These books are also in some sense about journeys either from a Muslim country to "the West" or a journey taken among Muslim women by non-Muslims. Some are also, clearly, escape stories in which the author is fleeing from an oppressive marriage or a changed political situation in which she perceives she has no place. But the central image that links them together, is the veiled Muslim woman.

Most airport literature with Middle Eastern or Muslim themes is fiction, either adventure or espionage thrillers in which women are marginal to the story. However, as Terry (1983) in her study of images of the Middle East in contemporary fiction recognised, much of this information is shaped by negative stereotypes of Arabs and Islam, ignorance of the achievements of Islamic culture and a belief in the inevitable conflict between Islamic and western values. The airport books included in this study tend to follow this pattern. Fiction is generally considered to be literature with imagined or invented narrative. Some of the publications about the lives of Muslim women

or the experiences of women in Muslim societies could almost be considered as fiction or even as “bio-fiction”, that is biography with strong fictional characteristics. Although some of these books may not be fiction in the technical sense of the word, in their marketing they promote a fictional image of Muslim women, using fear and fascination of the Muslim world together with a great deal of prejudice. The purchaser of such a book may not be able to distinguish the fine line between fact and fiction since, frequently, both are presented in such an imaginative and inventive manner. Such a book is *Princess* (Sasson, 1993: introduction) which declares:

While the words are those of the author, the story is that of the Princess . . . but with names changed and events slightly altered to protect the well-being of recognisable individuals.

It is claimed that this story was reconstructed from notes and diaries, as were the sequels *Daughters of Arabia* (1994) and *Desert Royal* (1999). However, there is insufficient evidence to be certain that this is biography, despite an afterword and internal evidence provided in the sequel (Sasson, 1994:21) where the princess is “recognised” by a member of her family who purchased a copy of the book, ironically at Frankfurt Airport. Neither the inclusion of maps of Saudi Arabia nor a family tree of the extensive Saudi royal family which, potentially, has over 20,000 members, guarantees that the story is authentic. The reader must decide whether the story is fact or fantasy. The story of Amira/Jenna in *Mirage* (Khashoggi, 1996) is acknowledged as a work of fiction, yet explores similar themes to Sasson’s books, in a fictitious country remarkably like Saudi Arabia. Khashoggi writes of a wealthy Middle Eastern family, differential treatment of males and females, cruel husbands, oppressed wives and a woman who seeks her own escape from a culturally imposed role. *Mirage* has a similar cover.

Saudi (Devine, 1986) views the complexity of Saudi society and the tensions of a cross-cultural marriage through the eyes of a young American woman who married into a prominent family. Although, *Saudi* mirrors some of the real life experiences of Alireza’s 1971 autobiography *At the Drop of a Veil*, it is a work of fiction. As the blurb of *Into the Wadi*, the memoir of a Jordanian-Australian cross-cultural marriage (Drouart, 2000) comments, these books present:

a sensitive compelling exploration of cultural similarity and difference, written against the versions of Arab and Muslim culture to be found in such popularist texts as *Not without my daughter*, *Princess* and *Sold*.

These books on cross-cultural marriage adopt a much less dramatic approach to Muslim society and there is no intent to romanticise the authors' experiences.

The autobiographies of Durrani (1995) *My Feudal Lord*, Farmaian (1994) *Daughter of Persia*, Dirie (1999) *Desert Flower* and Mosteshar's escape story *Unveiled* (1995) are, however, authenticated by the insertion of family photographs which locate the author of the autobiography in the times and places of the events she describes. For Durrani, ex-wife of Pakistani political figure Mustafa Khar, these events are close to the 1970–80s political turmoil surrounding Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his daughter Benazir. Waris Dirie is a well-known fashion model whose assisted autobiography, *Desert Flower: the extraordinary journey of a desert nomad* (1999), documents her transformation from nomad to spokesperson on female genital mutilation and women's rights in Africa. Iranian academic Farmaian (1994) traces her life from the times of the Pahlavi dynasty to the Islamic Republic of Khomeini and journalist Mosteshar (1995) is photographed at the press conferences held by President Rafsanjani of Iran.

Each chapter of the autobiographical stories of sociologist Mernissi (1995), *The Harem Within: tales of a Moroccan girlhood*, is illustrated with photographs within and looking out from the harem. But these are un-named, un-dated and, in the absence of human forms, quite architectural. These autobiographies are essentially written by insiders, Muslim women telling their own stories within the context of the Muslim community to which each belonged. Although there are criticisms of traditional values and political changes, their intention is to document and explain. So Farmaian (1994:332) uses the Persian carpet with its complex patterns as a metaphor to explain the changes—"dynasties rose and fell, displacing one another like the repeating arabesques of a carpet . . . ever changing yet always the same". She writes without bitterness, despite her personal losses. Mernissi (1995), who is a well known feminist, uses her stories, rich with humour, to explore the physical and mental restrictions such as communal life, lack of privacy, enclosure and the power relations which shape the harem. Viewed through the eyes of a child, these restrictions also mark boundaries between childhood and adulthood. But the intention of Durrani (1995) is much harsher, as she uses her book to expose the corruption and cruelty of her husband, as well as to criticise the cultural values of Pakistani Islam, which required her obedience and compliance.

A number of these books are also escape stories documenting the writer's struggle to escape from an oppressive situation. *Sold* is the story of Muhsen's escape from a forced marriage in the Yemen. Through this story, the contrast between a completely alien way of life . . . "fierce, dangerous, primitive" (Mushen, 1995:vii) and the sophisticated life in Birmingham, UK, is sharply drawn. Using the promise of a holiday, their Yemeni-born father tricks Zana and her sister Nadia, into marriages for which he was paid over £2000. Years later, he justifies his action:

You have experienced the proper life now, you can speak Arabic and you have a better understanding of life. That is all I wanted for you (Mushen, 1995:214).

Embedded within this extraordinary explanation for his actions, is his fear of non-Muslim cultural values. Her story raises a number of questions again about the cultural interpretations of Islam, especially in relation to arranged marriages and a father's rights. These questions are revisited in her mother's book, *Without mercy: a mother's struggle against modern slavery* (Ali & Wain, 1996). In *Not without my daughter* (Mahmoody, 1994), the cover synopsis describes the escape of Mahmoody and her daughter from becoming "prisoners of an alien culture, hostages of an increasingly tyrannical and violent man". Mahmoody was also deceived by her Iranian husband's promise of a brief holiday that turned into a permanent stay, and eventually she was smuggled with her daughter over the mountains into Turkey. A more recent escape story is that told by Fauziya Kassindja (1999) in *Do they hear you when you cry?* Although the marketing blurb describes her story as:

in the tradition of the international best sellers *Princess* and *Not without my daughter*, this is the dramatic and inspirational story of a woman fighting to free her self of the injustices of her culture . . .

any balanced reading of the text would recognise this is not the whole truth. Fauziya's story of escape from Togo, Africa, from a forced marriage and impending circumcision attracted media attention when she sought refugee status in the USA. The marketing bias omits to mention that more than two thirds of the book is about the appalling treatment she received in the care of the US Immigration and Naturalization Service and her struggle for justice and freedom in the USA. *Desert Flower* (Dirie & Miller, 2000) and *Aman* (Barnes

& Boddy, 1994) are both first person accounts of coming of age in Somalia, written by strong women who were escaping from the complexity of family relationships, arranged marriages and poverty. Both women now live in western countries. Like Kassindja (1999) these are authentic autobiographies, rich in cultural detail but they do not present a negative view of Islam.

Both *Unveiled* (Mosteshar, 1995) and *Out of Iran* (Azadi, 1988) detail the physical escape of women born into the wealthy and westernised elites of the Shah's Iran from the Islamic Republic established by Ayatollah Khomeini. Although written to evoke the sympathy of non-Iranians and to reinforce the image of a brutal fundamentalist Islamic regime, these are not the memoirs of powerless victims oppressed by the new regime, for both women were able to negotiate their own escapes. As both acknowledged, they were also escaping from the conflicts of their cultural identity. Mosteshar (1995:16) admitted "we had always taken our Muslimness for granted. Islam was a culture before it was a theology". Her struggle in Iran was as much related to loss of social class and influence, as it was to the role of Islamic women imposed by the new regime. The Islamic revolution in Iran had replaced the power of the wealthy with government by the mullahs. Azadi (1988:80) identified the reasons why her family was resented:

We were just copies of Westerners in the eyes of most Iranians. We paid lip service to Islam, never visited mosques . . . flaunted our sexual freedom.

Inter-woven with the three stories of escape from Iran (Mahmoody, 1994; Azadi, 1988; Mosteshar, 1995) is the motif of the *chador*. This all-enveloping black covering for women was identified as sending out:

a complexity of signals about a women's attitudes to the outside world, her social status, her religiosity and even her political stance. (Azadi, 1988:19).

Worn unwillingly by each of these authors, the *chador* symbolises the oppression of women by Islam, from which they must escape.

Only a small number of the books considered here were written explicitly from a non-Muslim perspective although, clearly, Mushen (*Sold*) considered herself an outsider. Both *Price of Honour* (Goodwin, 1995) and *Nine Parts of Desire* (Brookes, 1995) record the journey of non-Muslim journalists through the worlds of Muslim women. *In*

search of Islamic Feminism: one woman's global journey (Fernea, 1998) documents an anthropologist's search for Muslim understandings of feminism. Like Goodwin and Brookes, Fernea allows Muslim women to speak for themselves. There are many parallel experiences in their books including the difficulties of being an unaccompanied female in societies where this is not acceptable and their willingness to adopt the *chador* or *veil* as a means of gaining access to Muslim women. Both Goodwin's and Brooke's books provide well-researched background information on Islam and the politics of Islamic dominant countries, achieving a balance lacking in most airport literature. They recognised a number of recurrent themes: the veil as an instrument of oppression or a symbol of religious fundamentalism, the unequal treatment of males and females and as Goodwin (1995:7) identifies, growing Islamic extremism. Despite the empathy and skill with which they relate their experiences with Muslim women (and some men) and their attempts to provide an Islamic context for the treatment of women, both Goodwin and Brooks still view the women's lives through the cultural veil of western feminist traditions. This supports their belief that men and women are equal while Islam believes men and women are complementary. Brooks (1995:8) equates a woman wearing the *hijab* to being worth only half as much as a man is.

However, Fernea, who has lived in the Middle East for extended periods of time, is able to provide a more authentic view of Muslim women's experiences. She reports the anger of Muslim women at their representation in the west:

"The veil? That's all Western feminists talk about" Randa said.

"Well, it's what they can see with their own eyes", I protested mildly.

"They can't all speak Arabic and read the opposition newspapers."

"But they are obsessed with it" (Fernea, 1998:242-3)

and the misrepresentation of its meaning especially since, for some women, it is empowering. She reveals a diversity of opinions on contentious issues such as *hijab*, recognising that, for some Turkish intellectuals, it was as much a blind spot as it was for western intellectuals, equalling backwardness (Fernea, 1998:212). But, for other women, it is a statement of identity, religious reconversion and perhaps a protest against western intrusion (Fernea, 1998:243).

Mahmoody's book, *Not without my daughter*, is the other outsider's story. Although marketed as an escape story, it is also a book about culture-shock and fear of Islam. Like most Americans in the 1980s,

Betty Mahmoody probably considered Islam as anti-American and anti-western. This is confirmed early in her story when she expresses her fears of Iran, the country she identifies as having “the most openly hostile attitude towards Americans of any nation in the world” (Mahmoody, 1994:3). The mass demonstrations of Iranian school children chanting “*Maag barg Amrika!*” (Death to America!) reinforced this belief (1994:79). Mahmoody (1994:18) is repulsed by the behaviour of her husband’s family, “the smell of the greasy food, the stench of the people, the never-ending chatter of imponderable tongues” and feels completely alienated in that environment. With the breakdown of her marriage, as her husband Moody is drawn into rejecting his western veneer and re-assimilating himself into his family and Iranian culture, her isolation is complete. She is totally the outsider and her need to escape is inevitable.

Covering the Stereotypes

Airport books share a cover image of the veiled woman. This is a plain black *chador* (full-length veil) for stories of Iran and North Yemen (Azadi, 1988, Mahmoody, 1994; Mosteshar, 1995; Mushen and Crofts, 1995; Ali and Wain, 1999) and *burqa* (a full length veil with a small facial grill) now worn in Afghanistan (Goodwin, 1995). For Saudi Arabia, no matter how thinly disguised, a beautiful bejewelled Muslim woman wearing *niqab* (a face mask) through which only her alluring dark eyes show (Sasson, 1993, 1994, 1999, Khashoggi, 1996) is used. The two books about Somali women (Barnes and Boddy, 1994, Dirie and Miller, 1999) use dramatically posed photographs of women with covered heads, while on Kassindja’s cover (1999) a young woman peeks from behind a swirl of colourful veils. In *Nadia’s Song*, (Khashoggi, 1999), set in Egypt, a beautiful young woman wears the modest Islamic dress, although her underwear can be seen through the fine material and, of course, the veil.

A study of the covers of *Time*, the international news magazine, identified the cover as reflecting important editorial decisions, in creating first impressions and in selling the magazine. This concept is understood well by the designers of airport literature. A cover should be “simple competitive, poster-like and eye catching”. (Johnston and Christ, 1995:216) Their study identified women on only 14% of

covers and representing a limited range of occupations: entertainer, spouse, and queen. Thus *Time* is reflecting a limited and distorted image of women's role in a modern society. Similarly, the books studied have mostly restricted their covers to stereotypes of the sexually mysterious woman with titles and common marketing themes such as exposing the oppression of women and the struggle for freedom, together with an obsession with the veil. Among airport literature, exceptions to the veiled woman cover are provided by *My Feudal Lord* (Durrani, 1995) and *Daughter of Persia* (Farmaian, 1994) which are the assisted autobiographies of Muslim women born into influential and identifiable families. Their photographs appear on the cover and they are not veiled.

As Terry (1983:325) notes "these stereotypes and images have been reiterated so frequently in popular fiction that they have become the reflection of reality for most Westerners". The image of a Muslim woman wearing *hijab* (head scarf) or *abba* (full length cloak) or *chador* (full length veil) is used as a symbol of the oppression of women in the Muslim world while the jewelled *burqa* (face mask) hints at the excitement of sexuality in the *harem*. By reading such books, the traveller is drawn into a world to which no airline ticket or visa can give legitimate access. Like the travellers and artists of earlier times who were obsessed with what Said (1981:63) calls "the myths and stereotypes of orientalism", the traveller can visit the *harem* from an economy class seat on a domestic flight. In a study of perceptions of Middle Eastern women in western travel literature, Mabro (1991: 5) noted that many of the postcard images were actually posed in studios, using barred windows to create the impression of the photographer's access "... that he had unveiled the veiled", hinting at sexual delights. The rarity of the *harem* in modern times, nor its failure to match western fantasy, is not allowed to spoil a good story or a good marketing idea. In contrast, Mernissi's stories of her childhood in a *harem* in Morocco used architectural images to emphasise the substance of her experiences. Fernea (1998:333) believes that most of the comments on women's lives are written by men who are seldom invited into the private world of the family. She concludes her visit to Saudi Arabia with this comment:

I personally believed most of these accounts to be flights of male imagination, presenting Saudi women as stereotypical figures; rich gorgeous, idle passive creatures, prisoners of men.

This is how Muslim women are marketed in many airport books.

The language used on the covers of airport books, as well as in the text, reinforces the stereotype that Islam oppresses women, with the veil as the symbol of their enforced silence. There is virtually no recognition that the veil may have other meanings. The extravagant claims of the marketing blurbs are quite explicit including comments such as—"lifting the veil to show us the human face of Islam" (Brookes, 1995); "brutality hidden behind the veil . . . more horrific stories" (Sasson, 1999) and "Muslim women lift the veil of silence on the Islamic world" (Goodwin, 1995). Mosteshar's book is entitled *Unveiled* because she has escaped from Iran where wearing the *chador* was compulsory. An escape from oppression is a recurrent theme, "one woman's escape from the ayatollahs" (Azadi, 1988) as is the promise to expose the evils of Muslim societies, "an appalling indictment of the treatment of woman in Saudi Arabia" (Sasson, 1993). The descriptions such as "primitive stone houses with dung-plastered walls" (Muhsen, 1991) and "the squalor of their living conditions" (Mahmoody, 1994) reinforce the stereotypes of Islam as the religion of primitive and unsophisticated people. The use of the veiled Muslim woman as a "cover girl" is another example of how Islamic values are devalued and misunderstood, suggesting to the non-Muslim reader, a combination of the "romantic orientalist tales and feminist exposé" (Haddad and Esposito, 1998:xi).

The Veiled Muslim Woman

The discourse of the veil is complex and multi-layered, and as Berger (1998:108–9) recognised, fraught with paradox: while hiding the individual it enhances her visibility; while empowering some Muslim women, it may also make them vulnerable. Women become the public identity of Islam, at the cost of their individually recognised physical features and become generic "Muslim women" of the kind featured in airport literature. In some of these books Muslim women are manipulated to tell a story which confirms the western stereotypes of Muslim culture. The truth of their experiences and the pain that they have suffered should not be underestimated. However, the common themes of the covers and marketing blurbs indicate that they are not viewed as individuals but rather as an opportunity to reinforce the inferiority of Islam and the perceived terrible treatment

of women in Muslim countries. Yet the way in which Muslim women are treated could be a barometer of Islam. It was the *chador*-wearing women in Iran who became both an outward sign of opposition to the Shah's western-looking society and after the revolution, the visible sign of Islamisation. As A. S. Ahmed, an Islamic scholar cited by Goodwin (1995:47), indicated:

the position of women in Muslim society mirrors the destiny of Islam: when Islam is secure and confident so are its women; when Islam is threatened and under pressure so, too, are they.

As the book covers illustrate, the veil is considered important but its meaning is nearly always interpreted using western values. *Nine Parts of Desire* begins with an anecdote about veiling. The decision of Brooks' assistant to adopt Islamic dress was seen as adopting "the uniform of Muslim fundamentalist". But, Sahar sees her decision differently. "Why imitate everything Western? Why not try something of our own?" (Brooks, 1995:7-8). Symbolically, Durrani (*My Feudal Lord*) chose to wear the *dupatta*, the light head covering which is part of traditional Pakistani dress and rejected her western designer fashions, when she was seeking her own identity separate from that imposed by her husband. Even in *Saudi* (Devine, 1986:17) a comparatively sympathetic novel about an American woman who had married a Saudi man, the veil, mask and cloak are used as symbols of light and darkness. Two different cultures but it is the veiled culture, which is seen to limit women's freedom and "to enshroud the wearer in utter darkness". However, in her autobiography, *At drop of the veil*, the American Alireza (1971), who was married into a prominent Saudi family, and whose experiences are paralleled by the fictional *Saudi*, did not see the veil in quite the same way, acknowledging that the veil provided limitations to both women and men.

The veil is seen differently by Mernissi in her study *Beyond the Veil* (1987) as a means of managing space and controlling women, not because they are inferior but because they are "powerful and dangerous beings". Islam she argues:

affirms the potential equality between the sexes . . . existing inequality is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her power (Mernissi, 1987:19).

In Islamic culture there are restrictions on social interaction between unrelated men and women. A veiled woman may be secluded but

she may nevertheless have mobility because the veil protects her. Sasson (1993) related a number of incidents in which the anonymity of the veil allowed women to defy male restrictions while Abu Odeh (1993) suggests that wearing the veil endows young Arab women with a sense of untouchability, thus empowering them to participate in society. However, an Islamic scholar Zaki Badawi (cited by Goodwin, 1995:47) argues that, in western nations, Muslim women should not wear their *hijab* because it makes them conspicuous and subject to persecution.

Both veiling and unveiling may be seen as political acts or means of asserting Islamic identity. Kawtharani (cited by Haddad and Esposito, 1998:48) argued that wearing the *hijab* is a symbol of opposition to cultural and economic domination, as Sahir in *Nine Parts of Desire* (Brookes, 1995:7–8) also recognised. During their war for liberation from a colonial power, Algerian women used “strategic unveiling” (Berger, 1998:111) as a revolutionary tactic. Current struggles in Turkey between the government and political Islam have centred on Islamic dress codes, as an attempt to change the secular constitution. Young Turkish women (Smucker, 1998:31) are using the *hijab* as the symbol of Islamic feminism, which contradicts western images of veils as signs of male subjugation of women. Converts to Islam in Australia, similarly see Islamic dress including the *hijab* as “power dressing” (Selway, 195:102) and thus a public statement of Muslim identity.

In 1935 Reza Shah (Iran) banned the wearing of the veil in public, reflecting the western belief that it was a symbol of backwardness and an obstacle to social and economic modernity. This decision caused great distress to Farmaian’s mother (*Daughter of Persia*, 1994) who feared this innovation, believing it limited the educational opportunities for those young girls whose fathers would not accept the decree. Issues of social class and culture have also been identified by Ahmed (1992:145) as being significant in the discourse of the veil. During the Iranian revolution many educated women began to wear the full-length veil “in order to express solidarity with religious and lower class women” (Kamalkhani, 1998:135). The Islamic revolution reversed the Shah’s decision, making Islamic dress compulsory for all Iranian women, as a means of counteracting the western influence and secularisation of the Shah’s regime. So the *hijab* or, in Iran, the *chador* (the full-length veil) became not only a sign of religious modesty but a defence against un-Islamic influences. None of these perspectives are recognised by the airport books.

The tension between succumbing to religious pressure and asserting a woman's own Islamic identity is also never quite resolved in any of these books, for there is considerable diversity of practice in Muslim countries. There is only a belief that the veil or *hijab* is negative and a limitation to women's freedom. When Muhsen and her sister were dressing in all black clothes and veils, prior to meeting an official who may be able to negotiate their freedom, their mother objects to them covering their faces . . . "you're free now, you're British . . . dress as you want" (Muhsen and Crofts, 1995:183). The decision to wear the veil is contentious, since most of the airport books suggest that Muslim women have no choice. For example, there is some evidence (Goodwin, 1995:262) that Palestinian Muslim women living in refugee camps in Jordan are coerced into wearing *hijab* by a monthly charity allowance provided by Islamists for "good Islamic families". Compulsory veiling is well documented in all the books about Iran and Saudi Arabia. Amira in *Mirage* (Khashoggi, 1995:107) was forced to assume the veil prematurely, by her father as a punishment for dancing to music on the wireless. But an Egyptian Islamist who was interviewed by Goodwin (1995:342-4) runs her own religious television program and chooses to wear *hijab* with considerable dramatic flair, despite opposition from government officials who believed she was too conservative and should appear unveiled. In *Princess*, (Sassoon, 1993:47), the veil is symbolic of an important transition, for assuming the veil at the first menses marks the end of childhood but the child has no choice in this decision. Princess Sultana comments "the veil stamped her as a non-person" (Sassoon, 1993:47) but "with the veil, we Arab women become overwhelmingly tantalising and desirable to men" (ibid.:85).

Although, there are many *hadith* (authentic sayings) of the Prophet Muhammad, which document a positive attitude towards sexuality, Brooks (1995:42) admitted that she was confused by the paradox between sexual licence and repression. She cited a Muslim scholar who argued that the aim of the veil was "to create a truly erotic culture in which one dispenses with the need for the artificial excitement that pornography provides" (ibid.:24). This paradox is exploited in airport books, but they are concerned more with the negative aspects of sexuality. Sassoon's Princess Sultana (Sassoon, 1993, Sassoon 1994) provides ample evidence of this: deflowering young girls; sexual violence from Sultana's brothers-in-law; female genital mutilation; transmission of venereal disease from a husband to his wife as a consequence of consorting with foreign prostitutes. This intrusion

by airport literature into the private intimate domain creates an “artificial excitement”.

Among the negative stereotypes of Muslims reinforced by airport books are those commonly appearing in the media, such as Muslims as fundamentalist fanatics, using uncivilised means to punish and control the lives of women. This belief is well illustrated in *Mirage* (Khashoggi, 1995:51) where the birth of an illegitimate child leads to death by stoning for the story teller’s cousin and to avoid the physical and psychological cruelty of her powerful husband, the story-teller must fake her own death. Sasson (1993:243) writes of a young woman cruelly incarcerated by her uncle in “the woman’s room” for life, because she had violated the code of honour. In her autobiography, Durrani (1995:105 & 156) describes the physical brutality of her husband. “There was not a day that Mustafa did not hit me for some reason: the food was late, his clothes were creased” and within two hours of giving birth “he lashed his hand across my face, back and forth”. Other husbands including Mahmoody’s and Amira’s (Khashoggi, 1996) exercised their power to force submission, by beating their wives. A number of these books also recycle the story of the execution of a Saudi princess who formed a sexual relationship with an inappropriate commoner lover, exposed in the controversial docu-drama “Death of a Princess”. The telling of this story is the application of what Said (1981:67) calls “Western cultural power”, ensuring that the Saudis and other Muslims are shown as barbaric or primitive in their punishments. Although the context and culture of the relationship is clearly significant, airport literature markets failures in human relationships as evidence of Muslim behaviour and, by implication, Muslim culture.

Summary

While the veil has become a western feminist issue, a piece of cloth which symbolises the oppression of women, it has been argued (Ahmed, 1992) that it is legislation and deeply-entrenched cultural values which are more significant in the discussion on women’s rights. With the exception of the journalists Goodwin and Brooks and anthropologist Fernea, the writers of most of the books discussed fail to separate Islam from the cultural practices which operate in some countries. This is particularly the case in those books identified as

fiction or bio-fiction, where the narrator's story focuses on practices which the western world finds unacceptable. These practices may be un-Islamic reflecting patriarchal traditions that pre-date Islam. Airport books in fact, create a new kind of oppression of Muslim women in western societies, through the images they promote. Whatever the stated purpose of the book, the reader develops little understanding for women in Muslim societies but rather a sense of outrage at their treatment and all the stereotypes of Islam and Islamic culture are reinforced. Said's description of Orientalism as a "web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism and dehumanising ideology" (1991:27) could also be applied to most of these airport books.

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CHAPTER THREE

ADJUSTING THE TIE THAT BINDS: CHALLENGES FACING MUSLIM WOMEN IN AMERICA

Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith

Introduction

To the outside observer of a large immigrant mosque congregation on an early Sunday afternoon in North America, when the Muslim community gathers for corporate prayer, the first awareness may well be of the diversity of Muslims in America.¹ This is apparent not only in the distinctive colorful national dress they may don for the occasion, it is also visible in their ethnicities and the variety of languages they speak. Muslims in America, as represented in the mosques movement, are a microcosm of Muslims in the world. They come from over 60 African, Asian,² European and Middle Eastern³ nations; they are immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, (Wali, 1994:124–39), but also doctors, engineers and computer experts, part of the brain drain migration to North America. They are African American, Euro-American and Latino converts (or reverts).⁴ Their diversity is not only visible to the observer, it is consciously celebrated by the community as a special and unique experience reminiscent of the *hajj*

¹ For studies illustrating the diversity of Muslims in North America, see: Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idelman Smith, (eds.), *Muslim Communities in North America*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000; Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

² Nilufer Ahmed, Gladis Kaufman, and Shamim Naim, “South Asian Families in the United States: Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Indian Muslims,” in Aswad and Bilge, *Family and Gender among American Muslims*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996, 155–172.

³ For studies on Middle Eastern immigrants, see: Ernest McCarus, (ed.), *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

⁴ Revert is the preferred term used by Muslims for those who chose Islam as a faith. It is based on the Muslim teaching that “Islam is the natural religion,” that all humans are born Muslims; it is their parents who Christianize them, Judaize them or Hinduize them. Thus converts in reality are reverting to their original state.

where Muslims from different national, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, come together in obedience to the One God, bonded in faith and commitment, united as adherents to a religion which they believe to be designated by God for humankind.

America's Muslim women, of course, are as diverse as the constituency of the whole community.⁵ They are indigenous and immigrant; they are citizens and transients, professionals and members of middle or lower middle class; they are indigent and prosperous, highly educated and illiterate; they are "born-Muslims"⁶ and "born-again Muslims;"⁷ they are first, second and third generation Americans, as well as women whose ancestors have long been an established part of American society. Some wear their Islam, both literally and figuratively, with pride and often with zeal. Others prefer to practise the faith quietly and in family settings rather than publicly, and many follow the custom of traditional Muslim societies whereby only men go to the mosque. The large majority of Muslim women (and men) in America do not observe Islamic practices or even ritual occasions at all.

While the leadership of the American Muslim community is concerned about the unmosqued majority, they celebrate the diversity of the practising Muslims as a confirmation to the believers of the superiority of Islam as a social organization that does not distinguish on the basis of race, sex, ethnicity, or national origin. In this way, Islam can actually be interpreted as a kind of prototype of the American ideal of a melting pot, a means by which the many can be formed into one. Yet, on a practical level, diversity poses a variety of challenges, as it posits a wide variety of choices. What is the relation of Islam to culture and society, in general, and to the role and status of women, in particular? Given the broad range of backgrounds and associations, is there anything that American Muslim women have in common? How does the cultural baggage carried by the

⁵ For studies on Muslim women in North America see: Barbara Aswad and Barbara Bilge, (eds.), *Family and Gender among American Muslims*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.

⁶ A derogatory term used by practicing Muslims to designate people of the Muslim faith who are not involved in the mosque movement.

⁷ A term used by some Muslims who experience a dramatic change in their religious orientation, and who consciously affirm religious identity and adhere to prescribed ritual and behavior.

immigrants influence their perception of Islamic culture as it takes root in America? Is there a possibility of reinterpreting Islamic jurisprudence in relation to women and the family to provide more options for behavior in the context of America? Does the slogan "Islam is valid for all times and places" necessitate consensus on a particular prototype that has to be implemented wherever Islam is transplanted, or is there room for reinterpretation to help Muslims adjust to the new environment in which they find themselves? Can Muslims tolerate the different choices that members in the community make?

For both immigrants and American women who have chosen Islam, the task of discovering, or formulating, their sense of identity is crucial. As many Muslim women increasingly understand that they have multiple ways in which to describe themselves as both Muslim and American, they may appropriate hyphenated identities representing to a greater or lesser extent other ethnic, national, and cultural affiliations such as Arab-American, Pakistani-American, or African-American, as well as religious designations as Sunni, Shi'i,⁸ or Druze.⁹ Various occasions bring forth unconscious allegiances, affirming or creating differences within the community.

Women who have come from different cultures often find that the "self" that they are trying to define has infinite possibilities in the American context, whereas in the home country it was, by definition, often restricted and confined by cultural and traditional restraints, as well as the inculcated ideology of the nation state from which they have emigrated. The extent to which Muslim women choose to exercise the new freedoms that are possible in America, and to which they will be supported by their families in such efforts, is the subject of a great deal of private and public conversation and attention.

A variety of ideological options have been promoted to deal with the challenge of Muslims living in a non-Muslim, western country. On the one hand, there is the vision that is propagated by the Tableghi

⁸ For studies on the Shi'ite community in North America, see Abdulaziz Sachedina, "A Minority Within a Minority: The Case of the Shi'a in North American," In Haddad and Smith (eds.), (1994) *Muslim Communities in North America*, 3-14; Linda S. Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997.

⁹ For studies on the Druze in North America, see: Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idleman Smith, *Mission to America: Five Islamic Sectarian Communities in North America*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993, 23-48; Intisar J. Azzam, *Change for Continuity: The Druze in America*, Beirut: M.A.J.D., 1997.

Jamaat, a South Asian Islamic Movement,¹⁰ and the Tahrir,¹¹ which originated in Palestine and has gathered adherents among some university students, who see the community as permanently maintaining its separateness, difference and distinction in diaspora. Their interpretation of Islam necessitates this difference, both as a barrier to keep the immigrants, converts and their children in the fold, and as a hedge against acquiring American identity. Such separateness serves to keep Muslims “insulated” from what is described as secular, hence defined as *kafir* (apostate) society, which is to be avoided as much as possible. It does not encourage the participation of women in activities outside the home.

Other groups such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), who mostly adhere to the teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood of the Arab East and the Jamaati Islami of the subcontinent, also started from the conviction that secularist American society is to be avoided to whatever degree possible (Ahmed, 1991:11–24). They have now moderated their stance and are advocating participation in American society, albeit on Muslim terms, for both women and men. The majority of Muslims, however, have accepted the fact that they are part of the American context and operate with little concern for what the compromise might cost. Thus, the challenges persist: should Muslims strive for uniformity as they struggle to maintain unity and forge one community out of many? What shape would the ideal Muslim community take and what should be the role of women within it? Whose interpretation of these issues is authentic and who has the authority to judge its validity? (DeLorenzo, 2000:79–106). Increasingly, women’s voices are being heard in these conversations, as they are beginning to claim their right to participate in the interpretation and to help define authority.

¹⁰ For more information on the movement, see: Barbara D. Metcalf, “New Medinas: The Tablighi Jama’at in America and Europe,” in Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, 110–129, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

¹¹ For more information on the movement, see: Suha Taji-Farouki, *A Fundamentalist Quest: Hizb al-Tahrir and the Search for the Islamic Caliphate*, London: Grey Seal, 1996.

The American Challenge

The American context poses a constant challenge to Muslims who take their religion seriously. From their perspective, America often appears to be a society in constant flux. It has no coherent center of cherished values outside of the Constitution, which guarantees and emphasizes the freedom of religion and thought of the individual. It thus seems to Muslims that, in America, it is up to the people themselves to devise their own norms. Coalitions are formed and reformed as values change and are redefined, with communities of interest coalescing around a shared concern for one issue while the members might violently disagree on other issues. The Muslim vision of a religion and a way of life that provides moral guidance and structure, and in which value is placed on communal responsibilities over individual freedoms, seems very different and far preferable.

Western feminism has had a dramatic impact on American values, a fact that has long made it suspect among some Muslim women, particularly because of the seeming inability or unwillingness of the feminist movement to understand why feminist formulations of equality are not necessarily appropriate in the Islamic context (McCloud, 1993:448–455). For Muslims, it is difficult to live in western society without being influenced by, and, in many cases, adopting some of the feminist assumptions of freedom of access and opportunity for men and women. Since the 1960s, values that have impacted on the role of women have been dramatically transformed by coalitions of interest able to legislate equal rights for women and set up the institutions to monitor, provide, and implement, equal opportunities. Muslims struggle with what to accept and what to reject, which ideas are appropriate in their own understanding of how they want to live as members of the Muslim community, and what will be most effective in working within their own family and religious context.

Equally challenging for Muslims is the dominant American attitude towards Islam and Islamic values. Muslims experience American society as not only ignorant and unappreciative of Islam, but as one in which the media contributes regularly to a distorted image of the religion, particularly the role it defines for its women as wives, mothers and daughters. As is true in Europe, as well as in America, westerners seem to have the greatest difficulty in even beginning to understand, let alone accept, what they perceive as the unfairness of

the religion of Islam to its female members. These attitudes are perpetuated by a great number of factors, including (a) a long history of anti-Muslim prejudice in which Muslims from the Prophet onwards are seen as mistreating their women,¹² (b) reports of distinctly un-Islamic practices in regard to women sometimes carried out in the name of Islam in countries such as Taliban Afghanistan, Jordan or Pakistan, (c) pulp fiction or movies, where the misdeeds of individuals are attributed to the religion, and¹³ (d) some of the choices made by Muslim women themselves, such as the adoption of Islamic dress, which most Americans cannot imagine to be anything other than the result of Muslim male coercion.¹⁴

The typical western images of Muslim women as submissive, weak-willed, and the unwilling victims of sexual mistreatment and other forms of violence, supposedly justified by Islam, not only die hard but often are never seriously confronted. Studies in English and American literature (Sabbagh, 1990; Terry, 1985) and of the presentation of Islam in the American entertainment media, starting with silent films up to the movies and videos of the end of the 20th century, show clearly that Muslims, in general, and Muslim women, in particular, are the object of maligning, ridicule and unsubstantiated judgments.¹⁵ Muslim women and men in America today are formulating, as part of their public responsibility, the necessity of explaining, challenging and countering these kinds of negative stereotypes.

The Constituency of the Community

The majority of the approximately six million Muslims who live in America are first, second or third generation immigrants. Coming originally from the Middle East, they now represent virtually every

¹² For more information on the subject, see: Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

¹³ The film "Not Without my Daughter," is shown in many high schools in the United States as a documentary about Islamic culture.

¹⁴ For a study of discrimination and the hijab in the U.S. see: Kathleen Moore, "The *Hijab* and Religious Liberty: Anti-Discrimination Law and Muslim Women in the United States," Haddad and Esposito, (eds.), in *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* 179–200.

¹⁵ For more information, see: Jack G. Shaheen, *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture*, Occasional Papers Series, Washington, D.C.: Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, 1997.

area of the Islamic world. Much of the conversation by, among, and about, American Muslim women focuses on issues pertaining specifically to persons who have come themselves, or whose families have come, from non-western cultures. The American situation is unique in the west, however, to the extent to which it also has a very sizeable community of African Americans who have decided to identify themselves as Muslims (McCloud, 1996:65–73).

The adoption of Islam by African-Americans has taken a variety of forms over the last century and continues to be on the rise. American blacks have been attracted to a variety of heterodox movements, many only tangentially identified with Islam. Some African Americans continue to be part of the Nation of Islam as preached by Elijah Muhammad and until recently by Louis Farrakhan.¹⁶ Many now identify with Sunni Islam and are part of such movements as the Muslim American Society of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed. Some other Islamic or proto-Islamic African American groups exist, such as the Moorish Science Temple¹⁷ and the Five Percenters who are growing especially in the urban areas of the country (Nuruddin, 1994:109–132). African-American women are significant contributors to the growing and public efforts to help construct new forms of Islamic identity in the west, and are vocal in their critique not only of American racist society but of similar forms of oppression that they believe characterize the Islam of some of their immigrant co-religionists, as well as of some of the men in the African-American Muslim community.¹⁸

Women from other racial-ethnic groupings and identities also may choose to convert to Islam for a variety of reasons, although not in such significant numbers as blacks. Some, of course, do so because they have married Muslim men.¹⁹ While Islamic law allows marriage of Muslim men to women of the People of the Book, and the Qur'an promises that, "There is no compulsion in religion," (Qur'an, 3:256)

¹⁶ For more information on Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, see: Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

¹⁷ For information on the Moorish Science Temple, see: Ernest Allen Jr., "Identity and Destiny: The Formative Views of the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam," in Haddad and Esposito, *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* New York: Oxford University Press 2000, pp. 163–214.

¹⁸ See Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam*, New York: Routledge, 1995.

¹⁹ For additional information, see: Carol L. Amway, *Daughters of Another Path*, Lee's Summit, MO: Yawna Publications, 1996.

a large number of non-Muslim women who marry Muslim men report intense pressure to convert. Many do so out of respect for their husbands and because they do not want to raise their children in a two-religion household. Others adopt the faith out of personal conviction, perhaps rejecting what they see as the theological complexities of Christianity and opting for what they believe to be Islam's more straightforward structure of faith and practice. Some find the long heritage of Islamic culture and the synthesis of art, literature, science and philosophy to be appealing, while others are drawn to its more mystical or Sufi dimensions, in either classical or "new age" versions. Often attractive to American women is the Islamic emphasis on community over individuality; the importance of family structure with its attendant responsibilities in the light of what they see to be the diminishing of the family in the west; the stress on personal rights over communal responsibilities, and what seems to be a more holistic approach to life than they have found to be offered by American forms of Christianity or Judaism (Hermansen, 1991:188-201).

Euro-American women who have adopted the religion of Islam by choice often experience painful and isolating alienation from their families, who find it difficult to understand or appreciate that choice. If they decide to adopt Islamic dress, inter-familial tensions can be even more severe. While the African-American family is often more accepting than many white families, the clergy of the mainline Christian churches in the African-American community frown on converts and are deeply concerned at the fact that so many African-American young men are turning to some version of Islam.²⁰ At the same time, some African-American women have voiced their consternation at the discrepancy between the ideology of universality, equality and acceptance that they have been taught is the essence of Islam, and the racist and sexist practices of some of the Muslims they encounter.²¹ African-American women are increasingly vocal about the disappointment they experience when their expectations about gender equality in relationships in Islam are not met.

Small numbers of Hispanic, Native and other American women are also adopting the religion of Islam. Insofar as possible, they stress

²⁰ See Marsha Snulligan Haney, *Islam and Protestant African-American Churches: Responses and Challenges to Religious Pluralism*, San Francisco: International Scholars Publication, 1999.

²¹ Aminah Beverly McCloud, "Racism in the Ummah," in: Muhammad Ahmadullah Siddiqi, (ed.) *Islam in Contemporary Perspective*, Chicago, NAAMPS, 1994, 73-80.

those elements of the faith that resonate with cultural characteristics common to their own ethnic associations, such as respect for elders and the family, appreciation of the rhythms of nature, and the refusal to separate one's religious and spiritual beliefs from one's understanding of human life as a whole (Smith, 1999:160–167).

American Born Youth

Young people themselves are struggling with what it means to be Muslim in American society.²² Some of them actively rebel, not wanting anything to do with customs or symbols that mark them as different from their colleagues. This can be very difficult for their families, and it is generally the mother who needs to act as a buffer, a task that may prove painful since, at the same time, she is expected to be the guardian of tradition. If her children choose to wander from the codes of behavior dictated by the family's ethno-religious tradition, as is the case for significant parts of the American Muslim community, it is the mother who may well be blamed for falling short in her duties.

Other children appreciate the fact that they are Muslim and, as they move into their teen years, work actively for a clearer understanding of what Islam means in its pure and “un-acculturated” sense (Abu-Jaber, 1993:7–9). This may well put strains on the family that chooses to retain some cultural associations with its home country. Girls who are not allowed to date, particularly if their brothers may do so, sometimes feel resentful or even actively rebel.²³ Many young people find the allure of American teen culture too appealing to resist, giving deep concern to their parents. Children generally want independence, freedom of choice and their own chosen social networks, while parents want their children to maintain intimate relationships with the family. Decisions traditionally made for young people in Islamic cultures involving such things as education and profession often are not in the domain of the parents any more. Tensions often

²² For additional information on the Muslim struggle to define identity, see: Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Adair T. Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

²³ For additional information, see: Charlene J. Eisenhorn, “The Dilemma of Adolescent Arab Girls in an American High School,” Ph.D. diss., Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 1988.

arise between generations as the youth of the community struggle to loosen those ethnic and cultural ties and discover what it means to be an American Muslim. Inter-generational differences are often obvious and painful, as older family members reminisce at length about how it used to be in traditional Islamic cultures. Women must try to instill in their children appreciation for the opinions and customs of their elders, at the same time that they recognize that new times and places must bring change and adjustment. In several mosques, young women in the American Muslim community are often taking leadership positions in helping think how Islamic practices and observances can be maintained but often in new forms in the American context. During the month of Ramadan, for example, some high school girls are making it their special responsibility to visit hospitals and nursing homes for the elderly, helping and sharing with them as a way of expressing their thanks to God for his bounties and of helping non-Muslims understand what the “fast” means for Muslims.

Issues of Marriage

In traditional Muslim cultures marriage is negotiated by families although, clearly, that is changing in many parts of the world. A few communities in America still look nostalgically at, or even continue to practise, arranged marriages but, in general, the process of finding a mate is becoming far more open (Khalidi, 2000:48, 50). Some Muslim families do not allow any of their children to date; others allow the boys but not the girls to socialize, and still others capitulate to American culture and leave it to their children to negotiate their friendships. For those who fear that their daughters may fall victim to the vices of American society, or, at least, that they may want to marry other than Muslim men, it has been necessary to devise other means of socialization. The Islamic Society of North America set up a computer program to help in match-making. Mosques and Islamic Centers increasingly offer activities to bring chaperoned young people into contact with others through service or social encounter, as do associations and organizations, particularly through sponsoring conferences, summer camps and the like. Some Muslim parents, as well as individual men and women, place advertisements in one of several popular journals, and these journals regularly

publish articles about what makes for a good marriage, how to select a mate, and the importance of a marriage contract.²⁴ Several Muslim women lawyers, as well as activists, have formed an organization and are discussing the importance of signing an Islamic marriage contract in order to safeguard the interests of Muslim women as guaranteed by the shari'a and to demonstrate how a carefully thought-out contract can go a long way in avoiding future problems.²⁵

Two elements of traditional Islam make finding a marriage partner difficult for many Muslim women. The first is the open mixing of the sexes in American society, which young women and their families often find unacceptable, or at least, problematic. Opportunities for meeting appropriate potential husbands are, thus, often not available. The second is the Islamic prohibition against Muslim women marrying other than Muslim men, while the men may also marry Christians and Jews (the so-called "People of the Book"). Insofar as the men actually do that, and it happens with much more frequency in the west than in traditional Islamic societies, it obviously cuts down on the pool of men available to Muslim women. As a result there are significant numbers of unmarried Muslim women in America. Some of them are deciding to marry outside the faith. Of these, about half of the men convert to Islam. Some 20% of Muslim women in Canada are married to Buddhists, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus and men of other faiths. While there are no statistics available in the United States, the incidence of inter-faith marriages is on the rise, to the consternation of many parents and relatives.

Inter-marriage in all its permutations (inter-ethnic, international, inter-racial or inter-religious) is generally frowned on by the community. While some immigrant families insist that their daughters marry inside a particular ethnic or cultural grouping, others are more open to marriages between Muslims in general, no matter what the particular identity of the partners. Some American male converts to Islam report that they have had difficulty in finding a marriage partner. However, the American born generation appears to have a different perspective and to be more open to marriage outside the narrow restrictions of the family. Although not welcomed by the

²⁴ For additional information, see: *Islamic Horizons* published by the Islamic Society of North America.

²⁵ A group of Muslim women lawyers have established a network called Karamah. (www.karamah.org)

parents, some unions take place between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, as well as between those who want to practise their faith publicly and those who do not, and between Muslims and secularists. Thus far there has been very little inter-marriage between African American and immigrant Muslims.

Traditional Family Roles vs. New Identities

A woman's role is often related to the particular stage of life in which she finds herself. Traditional Islamic cultures have defined clearly, although obviously with cultural variations, what women should be and do, as they move from childhood through puberty, marriage, and old age. Part of the task of Muslims in America appears to some to be to determine which of those definitions are truly Islamic, rather than cultural, how closely they want to, or are able to, stick with traditional ways, and what kinds of adaptations, or even deep changes, are desirable or necessary in a new context. Many of the issues that Muslim women face are directly related to their role and function within the family unit. Those who have come from more traditional cultures may well find that there are clear tensions between familial expectations and the opportunities at least potentially available to them in American culture. They struggle to determine which values and associations are part of their cultural heritage, but are not necessarily Islamic, and should be passed down to their children.

American Muslim families often face particular pressures precisely because they are uprooted, not only from home cultures, but also from the aid and support of their extended families. Many women, who were able to work full-time in their countries of origin because their children were cared for by other family members, find that option is not available to them in the west. Some who are highly trained professionals opt to suspend, or even terminate, their professional careers so that they can remain home while their children are young. Elderly women in the Islamic community may find being cut off from family relations particularly painful, experiencing loneliness and isolation, and often being unable or unwilling to leave the home. This, of course, puts added pressures on younger women, who must be caretakers of both their children and their parents, providing added inducement to remain at home, rather than go out to work. Some communities with working families are struggling with

the question of whether or not to provide housing for the elderly, separating them from their families yet giving them support and assistance within a Muslim context (Ross-Sheriff, 1994:407–22).

Even for those mothers who choose to remain home, the task of raising children presents numerous problems. To what extent are young people permitted to, even encouraged, to play and socialize with non-Muslim children? This is one of the key issues in the growing debate in the American Muslim community over public vs. private schooling (Barazangi, 1991:157–176). Some argue that the chance for their children to interact with non-Muslims is essential to prepare them for their adult life. Others feel that it is important to keep their children within the Islamic community as long as possible, especially since private schooling would help to educate them “Islamically.” Many who would like, ideally, to send their children to a Muslim school, cannot afford to do so, and some worry that the quality of education in an Islamic parochial school might not adequately provide the quality educational and social skills necessary to succeed in America. Increasingly, mosques and Islamic centers are providing religious instruction after school and on week-ends for children who do not attend public schools which, in America, is still the vast majority.

Patriarchy has been a predominant theme in family relationships throughout the history of Islam, and it is alive and well in the American context although it may take different forms. Relationships are changing with modernization, with enhanced educational and employment opportunities for women, and with the pressures (often strongly resisted) of western secularism and of “equal opportunities” for both genders. Nonetheless, most decisions are still made within the family, and few women choose to carve out roles for themselves, either public or private, that meet with strong opposition from their fathers or husbands. Many Muslim groups and organizations are highlighting discussions about the roles and functions of women in Islamic societies and Islamic families (Howell, 1996:28–30). It is still up to the individual woman, however, to determine how she will “fit” in the Muslim community and, most particularly, in her own family and in relationship to her husband.

Muslims argue passionately that Islam is the first religion to liberate women and give them rights not available in other faiths.²⁶

²⁶ For additional information, see: for example, Lanya al Faruqi, *Women, Muslim Society and Islam*, Plainfield, Indiana: American Trust Publications, 1994.

They also point to the Qur'an as teaching equality of males and females (49:13, 9:71). There are, however, two verses that have been the center of debate between the traditional leadership and some Muslim feminists. These verses have usually been interpreted as assigning authority in the family unit to men. For those who accept the traditional interpretations of the exegetes and the jurists, this statute is eternal and applies for all times and in all places. Such expectations have the potential for serious misunderstanding, although a great deal of attention is being given in public discourse to appropriate male-female familial relationships. Several American women academics are arguing publicly for reinterpretation of the Qur'an since they see both traditional and current interpretation as reflecting male bias.²⁷

While the laws of the United States are very clearly against polygyny, and it is not legally possible for an immigrant to bring two or more wives into the country, a few have found a way around the legislation. Polygynous marriages are common among members of some of the Sunni African-American groups, who justify the practice as an effort to save African-American society by creating solid family units. Interviews reveal that polygynous marriages also take place within certain African Muslim immigrant communities, such as immigrants from Gambia in Washington D.C. A random sampling of imams revealed that the immigrant mosques will not sanction any polygynous marriages. All marriages of American citizens authorized by mosque officials require the pre-approval of the civil authorities. A few imams will allow polygynous marriages, however, if the bride and groom are not citizens of the U.S. and if the couple gets an approval from their embassy.

There is concern among some women that since shari'a Law is not operative in American courts, their rights may be undermined. There are a growing number of cases where the wife acquires a divorce ruling from the American courts, but her husband refuses to give her an Islamic divorce. Hence, while he can get remarried, she feels bound by the teachings of Islam to await her release from the bond of marriage. Muslim advisers are active in America in counselling men not to resort to such an option. Sexual violence, not exclusive to any element of American culture, is being recognized now as an evil in the Islamic community that must be

²⁷ For example the work of Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd., 1992.

addressed.²⁸ Abuse of wives by husbands tends to be more tolerated by members of first generation immigrant families, and less by second and third generation women who, generally, are better educated in the principles of Islam and aware of the negative public attention given in the west to spousal abuse.

Practice of the Faith

There appears to be a growing disagreement among American Muslims today about the importance of women in the open and active practice, and even propagation, of the faith. Religious education, traditionally the province of the Muslim male, rests to a great extent in the hands of women in terms of the religious education of their children at home and, increasingly, in the mosque. A growing number of women provide instruction in the Qur'an and Sunnah in Islamic study groups and Muslim women's "support" groups, known as *halakah*. Women, as well as men, understand the importance of having some knowledge of Arabic so as to be able to understand and interpret the holy text. In some of the larger Islamic Centers classes are being held for elderly women in Arabic and the study of the Qur'an. Such endeavors provide not only access to the religious materials themselves, but opportunities to socialize and find community in an Islamic context. A few lone voices are now being heard on the American scene calling for the institution of women as Imams or prayer leaders (in larger mosques Imams function much as pastors or priests), but, thus far, they are not very influential.

Following, to an extent, the model of women in churches and synagogues in America, many Muslim women are very active in their mosque communities, not only organizing bake sales and teaching classes but in some cases serving as fund-raisers, moderators of congregations and primary spokespersons in the public profession of the faith. Women are attending the mosque not only for the *'ids* and special occasions, but often for Friday or other special services. Participation in activities at the mosque gives some women a religiously sanctioned way of getting out of the house, of socializing with friends and families, and of illustrating for their children the importance of

²⁸ See for example, "Domestic Violence: Awareness and Action Needed," *Minaret*, 23,2 (February 2001): 7, 10.

the public practice of Islam. Such participation has become particularly important for those Muslims who feel that social interaction with non-Muslim Americans is to be avoided or, for whatever reason, choose not to have women involved in the workplace. Mosque attendance, which was once a strictly male activity, is, in the American context, increasingly a family event. Most mosques sponsor social events, particularly at the time of religious holidays, as a way to create the community lost by the absence of an extended family.

Among the several issues that Americans in general find it easy to misunderstand about Muslim women is their position in relation to men in the formal prayer, especially the Friday *jum'ā*. Western sensibilities, generally most highly honed when the practices of others are being critiqued, are jarred by what seems to be the inequity of men at the front of the prayer hall and women in some other place. Muslim practices about women's appropriate place differ in America in terms of the public prayer, but, as is true traditionally, men and women do not occupy the same space. Sometimes women are at the back of the hall behind the men; sometimes on the side (often separated by a kind of curtain or barrier); sometimes on a second floor balcony, where they can see the men and the Imam below, and, occasionally, they are in a completely separate room with the service piped in through closed-circuit television or speaker. While they may not all agree on what is the most appropriate form of separation, virtually all Muslim women say that not mixing with men during prayer is helpful for them and for the men in concentrating on the ritual rather than on each other.

For some American women, perhaps particularly those who have more recently adopted Islam, following one of the Sufi or mystical religious paths has a particular appeal. Earlier in the century Sufism in America was often closer to New Age movements than to classical mystical orders. More recently there has been a growth of movements directly related to the traditional orders, with leaders trained in classical disciplines.²⁹ Some women find orders that follow practices of dancing or chanting/singing to be of particular appeal. A number of women who do not choose to identify themselves with Sufism as such are, nonetheless, emphasizing in their teaching and writing the more spiritual dimension of Islam, trying to help their sisters understand that the religion is more than simply rules and

²⁹ For additional information, see Laleh Bakhtiar, *Sufi Women of America: Angels in the Making*. Chicago: KAZI Publications, 1996.

regulations about dress and behavior. Women are increasingly articulate about the importance of modeling Islam as a religion of reason, moderation, and spiritual achievement. Some see that this modeling should move into the sphere of *da'wa* or propagation of the faith, sometimes by inviting others to participate in Sufi movements or other spiritually-oriented sessions.

Women in the Public Arena

At the same time that they focus on their family units, and, in particular, on their relationships with husbands and children, many Muslim women in America are also giving increasing attention to how to relate to the wider contexts in which they find themselves. Again the question can be raised, what does it mean to be Muslim in American society? Which is the primary identity, or how can one identity be underscored without doing injustice to another? Being a woman, of course, provides yet another variable with which to deal in relation to family expectations and to one's understanding of the requirements of Islam as a way of life.

For some women the decision about public participation has to do directly with issues of employment. While, traditionally, many Muslim men have not wanted, or allowed, their wives to work, circumstances are generally different in the western context as they are changing elsewhere in the world. Some families look favorably on women's outside employment because it allows women to use their educational training; it brings in extra income, and it gives women an opportunity for professional fulfilment (Aswad, 1994:501-509). Women who decide to work in the public domain, either because they want to use their professional training, or because the family needs additional income, are faced with a variety of choices. Are there certain professions that are more appropriate for women than others? What does a woman do if her answer to that question differs from that of her husband? Many American Muslim women, as is true in cultures across the world, believe that the degree of their public participation, whether it is in a professional or a blue-collar capacity, is determined by the way they decide to dress.

The issue of "Islamic dress," which, in its most obvious form, means that the hair and extremities are covered, has many dimensions. Some women are proud to choose it because they believe its adoption is their Islamic duty. Women often say that if they are dressed

Islamically they are free to enter any profession that they choose because there is no danger that the men with whom they work will make unwanted advances. Ironically, perhaps, it is the very wearing of Islamic dress, particularly head-cover, which hinders some women from getting jobs or being professionally advanced. Muslim organizations such as CAIR (Council for American Islamic Relations) are working hard to expose such cases of prejudicial treatment in the workplace (Durrani, 1999:6). Even within the Islamic community the issue of dress can be divisive. Those who choose it may be ridiculed by others who do not; those who leave their heads uncovered may be sharply criticized by more conservative or traditional women.

Many women are also responding to the obvious need to work in other contexts for community cooperation and in the effort to help educate the American public about what it means to be Muslim. Mothers are increasingly aware of their responsibility, not only for helping their children understand and appreciate Islam, but also for educating them about the faith in whatever ways seem appropriate, and for instilling in them a pride in being Muslim. They are also taking responsibility for working with the public schools in sharing elements of faith and practice with non-Muslim youth and making sure the curricula are as free as possible of demeaning stereotypes and false information about Islam. For many Muslim women, to venture beyond the home and the mosque, while clearly maintaining strong relationships with those institutions, is the most direct way of making an impact on the Muslim community and on American society on behalf of Islam.

Some women are making their public contributions as academics, teachers and researchers, working through the Islamic historical, social and legal sciences, to add new information to the store of Islamic knowledge. They are publicly challenging, for example, whether documents such as the universal declaration of human rights and CEDAW declaration (U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) truly take into account the rights of Muslim women, and are raising appropriate questions about them. Others are turning their energies toward effective forms of social action. They include women working in NGOs and civic organizations, those operating in the political arena and anti-defamation movements, and some religious activists. Many of them are unmosqued, while some young women who have grown up under the influence of national Muslim organizations such as MYNA (Muslim Youth of North America), and are now taking their place in the leadership of

the American Muslim community. Islamic organizations in general are proliferating in the United States and Canada, and, increasingly, women's organizations are vocal and enthusiastic participants in the efforts to bring about better understanding of rights, responsibilities and opportunities within the Islamic context.

A Range of Responses

Muslim women in America today are beginning to help carve a place for Islam. As community activists, professionals, teachers, lawyers, and journalists, they are assuming a personal challenge to help the American public understand that while practice often ranges widely from the ideal, the essential Islamic system is one that is advantageous for women. Thus, they are working hard to make sure that Americans understand what they genuinely share in common in terms of their appreciation of Islam. It is not surprising that, in the process, they are experiencing concerns of definition and practice that are prevalent in all religious communities in the rapidly changing west. And it is also not surprising that they may find themselves in very different places from others of their Muslim sisters as they struggle with questions of role, identity, and involvement.

How are women reacting to the multiple demands on their attention, not only in terms of time, but also of affiliation? Some capitulate to the temptation to fully "belong," relegating their Islamic identity to a private realm or ignoring it completely so as to achieve professional success, social integration, or a personal sense of societal belonging. As is true of all identity decisions, such a move is considered courageous, modern and smart by some of their co-religionists, and a cowardly sell-out by others. Many try to take a more moderate road, professing their Muslim identity but not practising, dressing, or living in ways that would identify them openly with the religion. Some Muslim academics have found that the easiest way to "belong," to be taken seriously by non-Muslim colleagues, is not only to reject the accoutrements of Islam oneself but even to join with western sisters in providing a critique of Islam by western standards and through the lens of western academic presuppositions. Others in the Muslim community, not surprisingly, and sometimes unfairly, accuse such sisters of having paid their dues to American culture by attacking Islam or Muslim cultures.

Some Muslim women respond by taking the opposite route—

speaking, dressing, and living in ways as obvious as possible to demonstrate that they reject the norms of western culture and advocate a way of life that is complete unto itself. Sometimes, women who adopt this position have come fairly recently to Islam themselves, and choose their dress, their names and their lifestyles to conform as closely as possible to what they believe to have been the prescriptions and models provided by Prophet Muhammad.

For those women who may reject all of these possibilities the way is not always easy. While Muslim women may think that some of the interpretations that are being promulgated by their co-religionists in America are too restrictive, exceeding even much of what is preached in the Arab world or the subcontinent, they are very reluctant to attack such conservatism, for fear that it will provide ammunition for those ready to attack Islam and Muslims. They may speak quietly among themselves about the need for religious moderation, or even about the unfair ways in which they are treated by their husbands or other men in their families, but they are careful not to share these thoughts with outsiders. Even in all-Muslim gatherings, meetings and conferences, women who are not espousing a fairly conservative interpretation of Islam generally express themselves with care for fear of provoking a hostile response from within the community.

No matter what mode of response they may choose, Muslim women who are in the forefront of reinterpreting Islam for the 21st century west are working hard to determine a viable alternative to traditionalist or conservative understandings of Islam, on the one hand, and the influences of western secularism, on the other (Sonbol and Abu Gideiri, 2001). They point to the historical dominance of males in interpreting the texts and laws of Islam, and are vocal in their call for women's voices and women's participation. Islam, they insist, is not a once-and-for-all thing that can be unearthed from the past, dusted off, and automatically applied, in all ages and circumstances. Rather, by its very definition and Qur'anic presentation, Islam is a process, a mode of becoming that is never finalized but made newly relevant in each different time and place. Now, they argue, is the time for women—and specifically women in America—to exercise the Islamic right of *ijtihad*, or individual interpretation, and to do the kind of scholarly research that will allow them to interpret and re-interpret classical materials in ways that support the full participation of women in the private and public spheres.

Post-9/11 Afterward

The events of September 11, 2001, rocked the American Muslim community as they did American society in general. The initial response in the Muslim community was fear of retaliation. But, as the “war on terrorism” took hold, it was increasingly justified as a struggle to bring civilization to the uncivilized, among the consequences of which would be liberation of the oppressed women of the Afghanistan. American Muslim women have found themselves thrust into the public eye in a new way, particularly as the world has looked at the often-photographed images of Afghan women and used them as a benchmark for how women are treated in Islam.

Muslims welcomed President George W. Bush’s initial plea to U.S. citizens not to take out their rage on American Muslims and not to see the “war on terrorism” as a war on Islam. They have also been gratified by the response of many in the religious community of the U.S. to reach out to Muslims for conversations, information, and even participation in inter-faith religious gatherings. Members of mainline churches and synagogues have offered to accompany Muslim women to the supermarket or other locations outside of the house to try to ward off any possible harassment, or to run errands for them. Some non-Muslim women have even gone so far as to wear a scarf as an act of solidarity with Muslim sisters.

Nonetheless there have been numerous instances of intolerant and ugly behavior on the part of some Americans toward Muslims in the aftermath of the tragedies. Sometimes these have taken the form of vituperative comments about women and especially those who wear Islamic dress. In some instances, women have been harassed and spat upon, their scarves ripped off by angry Americans who saw them as epitomizing the threat against U.S. society. A random survey of 1781 American Muslims, conducted during November and December 2001 by the MAPS program at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, found that one in four of those interviewed had experienced some form of verbal abuse.³⁰

³⁰ While 39% were not aware of any form of discrimination, 25% reported verbal abuse, 8% racial profiling by police resulting in a stop, search or arrest, 6% experienced physical abuse or assault, 6% destruction of property, 3% were denied employment, 2% reported that their businesses were boycotted, 7% reported a combination of the above cited experiences, 2% reported threatening phone calls, negative

The response among Muslim women to such experiences has varied, demonstrating the diversity of the Muslim community in the United States. Some immigrant Muslim women who previously had not worn a scarf or veil have begun to dress more Islamically as a way of affirming their pride in being Muslim at the same time that they are Americans. This phenomenon is also evident among white converts to Islam who want to show that they will not be cowed into submission. African-American Muslim women continue to wear the hijab as a sign of self-definition and defiance to a racist society. Some, who previously had donned a hijab as a fashion statement, rather than a symbol of Islamic commitment, appear to have now removed it, seeking anonymity. Still others, who had worn the hijab as a cultural badge to please their parents, no longer do so out of concern for American prejudice.

As events in the Middle East, Pakistan, South-east Asia, Nigeria and other parts of the world, serve to focus American attention on instances of violence carried out in the name of Islam, with the treatment of women receiving particular attention, Muslim women in the U.S. have faced new challenges. The press and the media, while in many cases genuinely trying to understand and portray Muslims as accurately as possible, often remain mired in the prevailing stereotypes of Islam and its perceived treatment of women. Muslims have frantically tried to fill requests for speakers about Islam, to present the faith and its traditions in balance and in context, and to demonstrate in a personal and often public way their understanding of the true roles and opportunities for women offered by Islam. Many women have played active roles in the program developed by the Council on American Islamic Relations to hold "open houses" for non-Muslim members of their local communities to visit their mosques and get to know their Muslim neighbours. Women and men worked immediately after the attacks to organize blood drives, raise money for families with losses, and to console those affected by the tragedies. Some began writing pieces in newspapers and calling other media outlets.

Meanwhile the US government is stepping up its efforts to identify potential "terrorists" among the members of the American Muslim

looks and other forms of discrimination. Bukhari, Zahid H., Sulayman S. Nyang, and the Project MAPS: Muslims in American Public Square, *American Muslim Poll 2001*. Washington, DC [Computer file] Conducted by Zoghby International, Utica, NY. Washington, DC: Project MAPS: Muslims in American Public Square, Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (CMCU), Georgetown University, (producer and distributor), 2002.

community. Racial profiling has reached a new high. Tensions have risen as a result of government raids on the homes and businesses of Muslim leaders and institutions, many of whom have provided the visible leadership for Muslims in the United States. Freedoms previously enjoyed by Muslims as American citizens seem now to be curtailed, and levels of fear and frustration within the Muslim community are rising as agencies of the American government watch and record their movements. Many Muslim charities working in support of orphans and widows have been shut down by the federal government.

Muslim women who had felt empowered in the United States, and were taking the initiative in creating Islamic institutions, support groups and social institutions, have suffered a setback as a consequence of the backlash and the profiling. Not only are they increasingly under public scrutiny, but they have had to refocus their efforts to protect their families and defend the Muslim community in an environment that they experience as more and more hostile. Those who have been working in the American context for years to help identify and eradicate instances of abuse, such as family violence, are now under intense pressure not to call attention to anything that might result in the jailing or deportation of Muslim men.

Women in positions of Islamic leadership, like the vice-president of the Islamic Society of North America, are speaking out as clearly as possible urging Muslims to take responsibility for addressing evils done in the name of Islam such as violence and oppression. The current atmosphere of rising suspicion about Muslims in the U.S., however, makes such efforts doubly difficult. Meanwhile Islamic schools, whose curricula are developed and taught primarily by women, are working to teach Islam in the context of American society. The task of helping children to understand and appreciate the values on which the United States was founded, as well as to be proud of their Islamic heritage, is becoming increasingly difficult in today's highly-charged atmosphere. Muslim women, as well as men, continue to stress the understanding of an Islam that is not violent, not repressive, and certainly not anti-American.

The society that has provided a context for some of the most creative efforts to understand the true and proper position of women in Islam is now presenting new challenges for Muslim women and men. It remains to be seen, as international events escalate and with the conviction, on the part of some Americans, that their prejudices against Islam are indeed justified, how these challenges can be met.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE MECCA OF GENDER EQUALITY: MUSLIM WOMEN IN SWEDEN¹

Anne-Sofie Roald

Introduction

In the last four decades of the twentieth century Swedish society has experienced a fundamental change in its ethnic constellation. The pre-sixties conception of Sweden as a country with a homogeneous population altered dramatically with the entry of “guestworkers” who, rather than being, as presupposed, economic visitors, came to establish permanent immigrant communities. With the refugee waves of the eighties and nineties, the immigrant communities grew and, at the turn of the second millennium, every fifth Swede had an “immigrant background” (Sander, 1996). Sweden might, on the one hand, be regarded as having a liberal refugee policy, indicating that many refugees have been accepted into the country. However, the strong Swedish concept of “equality”, with “Swedishness” as the standard, have made obstacles for many immigrants and refugees to become an actual force in society.

Sweden has a strong policy of “equal opportunities” in many fields, but it is in gender issues that this policy has come to the forefront. It is a policy which has started at the top of the hierarchy, and the Social Democratic governments have, during the nineties, had a slogan for their governmental constellation: “Every second MP a woman!” The result has been that recent governments have consisted of approximately 50% women. The policy of gender equality has started to get a hold on society at large and it even seems to influence Muslim communities in Sweden.

In the nineties women have started to have a stronger position in the male-dominated Muslim organisations, but it is with the establishment of independent female organisations that Muslim women have come to play a role, not only within the Muslim communities,

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but also in major society. The establishment of women's organisations seems, to a great extent, to be a result of women's discontentment with the function of the Muslim organisations, as well as with mosque activities where women feel that their initiatives are not fully appreciated. This paper will discuss Muslim women's organisation in contemporary Sweden, with the perspective of the pattern of "equal opportunities" as the theoretical framework.

Muslims in Sweden

The last census where religious affiliations were asked for in Sweden was in 1930 with fifteen persons counted as Muslims (Karlsson and Svanberg, 1995). The Muslim immigrants came to Sweden just after World War II when Turkish-speaking Tartars emigrated from Finland and Estonia. Starting from the 1960s, the first wave of Muslim labour immigrants entering Sweden consisted mainly of young Turkish, Yugoslavian, Albanian, and Pakistani men, who came as industrial workers to contribute to the thriving Swedish industry. With the legal restriction of labour immigration in 1967 the pattern of immigration changed and became one of family reunion, with the immigrants marrying spouses from their homelands.

During the eighties a stream of refugees from Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, with many Kurds belonging to these three national groups, entered the country and, in the nineties, Somalis, Bosnians, Kosovo-Albanians, and more Iraqi refugees came. The biggest groups of immigrants are the Iranian and the Bosnian, followed by Turks and the Arab-speaking group (Iraqis, Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian), Albanians, and Somalis. The Southeast Asians, however, constitute only a small group.

In contrast to many other western countries, where Muslims came to pursue post-graduate studies, and often "remained behind", Muslims in Sweden are, generally speaking, poorly educated. Although there is a great imbalance in the various Muslim groups, with some national groups having a high rate of lowly-educated individuals, and others consisting of many highly-educated persons, the general picture is that Muslims in Sweden are lowly-educated. This has to do with the labour immigrant waves consisting of unskilled workers, and with the fact that highly-educated Muslim immigrants and refugees tended to go to English-or French-speaking countries, where they did not have to learn a new language in order to get a job.

The language issue among immigrants in Sweden is huge. One of the reasons why so few of the immigrants learn Swedish properly must, mainly, be seen as a result of the residential segregation. As immigrants rarely have contact with the Swedish population, and as the unemployment rate for immigrants is high, the opportunities to practise the Swedish language outside the language courses are few. Moreover, due to this residential segregation, second-generation immigrants frequently go to public schools where only a small number of pupils have Swedish as their first language. Thus, even the next generation's ability of speaking Swedish is low. The result is that the inability to speak Swedish is regarded as the greatest obstacle to immigrants' integration into Swedish society.

It is difficult to give an exact measure of how many Muslims are living in Sweden, but the number claimed by researchers, on the one hand, and Muslim organisations on the other, ranges between 200,000 and 300,000 out of a total Swedish population of nearly nine million (1999).²

The policy of the Swedish state towards immigrants in general, and Muslims in particular, has been one of paternalistic "caretaking", that is where, although the material needs of immigrants are taken care of, full integration into major society has been difficult. The much-debated establishment of the National Office of Integration in the late 1990s indicates the difficulties the state faces with regard to the integration of immigrants into Swedish society.

In 1974, the government proclaimed "multiculturalism" by guaranteeing a freedom of choice for "members of linguistic minorities domiciled in Sweden" between "retaining and developing their original cultural identity and assuming a Swedish cultural identity" (SOU, 1974). Theoretically speaking, this notion of multiculturalism seems to be in opposition to the Swedish reality, with its segregation between "ethnic" Swedes and immigrants in most social fields.

Below, I will look into two phenomena, which I consider fatal for contemporary Swedish cultural expression. Firstly, there is the understanding of a historical process of "homogenisation" of Swedish society and, secondly, there is the governmental Swedish "jämställdhet" (equal opportunity for both sexes) policy.

² In this number I count both nominal Muslims and Muslims adhering to the five pillars of Islam. For further information see Sander, 1996:273.

The "Homogenisation" of Swedish Society

Two ethnologists, Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren, discuss what they call "the cultural struggle" in Sweden (Ehn and Löfgren, 1982). They have observed how the cultural struggle in early twentieth-century Sweden between the Bourgeoisie and the Working Class resulted in a "bourgeois" of the latter. This is, according to them, similar to the process identified by Roland Barthes in France (Ehn and Löfgren, 1982:77). They further claim that, as the culture of the Bourgeoisie became *the Culture per se*, great parts of this culture came to be regarded as *the "Human Nature"*. They depict this process as "the scientification of daily life" (*vetenskapliggörande av vardagen*), maintaining that discursive arguments came to be scientific rather than moral or religious (Ehn and Löfgren, 1982:78). To act wrongly was no longer immoral or sinful, rather it became, for example, unhealthy, insanitary and abnormal. They say:

Issues which previously were regarded in terms of morals have become hard facts. The "scientification" gives the impression that it is no longer a dominating class who tries to force through its own definition of reality, rather it becomes a question about matters which are elevated far above the bickerings and pettiness of the class struggle. Normality and human nature become, in the words of Barthes, an *anonymous ideology* (Ehn and Löfgren, 1982:78 [translation mine]).

Ehn and Löfgren refer to various strategies which the dominating classes or groups use, in order to maintain cultural hegemony, such as, either opposing antagonising subcultures, or incorporating cultural expressions of various sub-cultures in society (Ehn and Löfgren, 1982: 80). I believe that the incorporation of parts of the radical message of the students' revolt of 1968, with its claim of social equalisation such as, for instance, levelling off class distinctions, must be regarded in the light of such an incorporation of certain sub-cultures into the mainstream ideology.

The American scholar Joyce Gelb claims Sweden to be a country of "feminism without feminists", thus indicating an incorporation of sub-cultures into governmental policy (Gelb, 1989:137–177). Gelb points at how, in Sweden, protest movements tend to be absorbed by the state and their ideas institutionalised. She sees this phenomenon as a problem-solving strategy in order to avoid great controversies between the state and civil society in general. Gelb deals with feminism, and she concludes that, neither has a militant feminism arisen, nor has

feminist theory had a real impact in Sweden (Gelb, 1989:137–177). Following Gelb's arguments, and by linking them to Ehn's and Löfgren's observations, it seems that, in Sweden, conflicts have been avoided by institutionalising or incorporating parts of conflicting ideologies, rather than the whole bit. In this case, the protest which remains comes from the most extreme parts of the opposition movement and these are usually small groups easy to control. Andrew Jamison, a researcher at Lund University in Sweden, has observed a similar process in the environmental movement, where environmental issues promoted by various movements have, to a certain extent, been incorporated into official policy (Jamison, Eyerman, Cramer and Laesser, 1990).

A similar process can be discerned in the historical development of the Swedish welfare state, where the concept of "the People's Home" (*folkhemmet*) came to be the main vehicle for the "bourgeois" of the working class. It was in the 1920s that the Social Democratic Party's social project of "the Good Home", which later came to be developed into "the People's Home", was founded. The dream of "the People's Home" was built, on the one hand, on the dream of the welfare society, with equal opportunity for all. On the other hand, it was built on "functionalism" as an ideal, where "life and society could be broken down into a number of basic functions which, in turn, could then be made the basis of planned action" (Rojas, 1998:51).

As Sweden was a society of peasants up to the great industrialization of Sweden in the late 19th century, the relation between state and farmers was the main structure in society. Mauricio Rojas, an economic historian and a researcher on ethnic relations in Sweden, sees "the remarkable combination of *popular liberty* and *central control* which characterizes the relationship between the state and the people" as a distinctive theme of Swedish history (Rojas, 1998:9–10. [Italics mine]). He identifies the two contradictory ideological positions in "the People's Home" in Sweden as that "the Swedes" are either "subjects under the thumb of the social state, or citizens emancipated by a 'strong society'. The common link is the tension between freedom and submission which runs clearly across 500 years of Swedish history" (Rojas, 1998:10). In this context it is interesting to note that the English newspaper *The Independent*, in considering the question of legislation on pornography in various European countries, denoted Sweden as the country of love and law-making (*The Independent*,

22/8–00). This expression points to a perception of such a contradiction in Swedish society between freedom and submission, as observed by Rojas.

Åke Sanders, a researcher on Muslims in Sweden, has observed, that Sweden has been built on the notion of “One nation, One people, One religion” (Sander, 1996:272). He links the segregation of Muslims in Sweden to this idea of “a common culture and religion, including common manners, norms and value system, as well as a common way of thinking in general” (Sander, 1996:273).

“The People’s Home” notion of equality and equal opportunities for everybody, together with the notion of “One nation, One people, One religion” seems in Sweden to have turned into an idea of uniformity or homogeneity (*enhetlighet*). A common expression, when it comes to immigrants maintaining their cultural practices, is that “when in Rome, do as the Romans do”. It is particularly this concept of uniformity which prevents the integration of many immigrants, in general, and Muslims, in particular. For instance, the possibility of women with headscarves getting a job is limited, since employers believe that sales and reception clerks, or cashiers, with headscarves, would be offensive to “ethnic” Swedish customers. Similarly, employers are reluctant to employ persons with a dark complexion, as they are afraid the customers will disappear.

Equal Opportunity Policies

The cultural struggle, which seems to have been an aspect of European culture in the twentieth century, resulted in a universalisation of middle-class ideology in the western world (Ehn and Löfgren, 1982). I believe that, in order to understand the development of the view of gender relations, one should also look into the role of the market economy when determining which cultural factors in the middle-class ideology came to be accepted. The first issue to raise is why feminism slowly came to gain ground in the dominating ideology in the mid-twentieth century. Which factors were decisive in creating a fertile ground for the expansion of feministic ideas born already in the nineteenth century?

To answer such questions, I would firstly claim that feminist ideas became part of a middle-class ideology as early as late nineteenth-century. Such a view does not contradict the theory of “the cultural

struggle”, since Ehn and Löfgren point not only to a struggle *between* various cultures or classes, but also *within* cultures or classes. They discuss the cultural struggle in terms of an elaboration with various strategies, either opposing or incorporating sub-cultural expressions, in order to maintain cultural hegemony. The rise and acceptance of feminist ideas within the framework of a middle-class ideology, therefore, have to be regarded as a struggle *within* the middle-class. In this struggle, society’s need for an increase in working labour changed the direction of notions of women’s place in society, thus accepting an existing sub-cultural trait within the middle-class ideology.

How, then, did feminist ideas come to be common property? It was in the 1960s that the concept *jämställdhet* appeared in Sweden. *Jämställdhet* can be understood in various ways including “equal opportunity”, “equal opportunity for both sexes”, “equal status”, and “equality between the sexes”. It came later to replace the term *jämlikhet*, as that concept of “equality” and thus conveys a notion of the physical similarity of the sexes (Florin and Nilsson, 1999:14). In the mid-1970s the Social Democrats officially recommended the use of the term *jämställdhet*. According to historians, Christina Florin and Bengt Nilsson, this recommendation implied a vision of a governmental reform program for equal opportunities for men and women in Swedish society (1999:14–15). In Sweden the implementation of such a new gender order was introduced as a political project, which affected both actual policy and legislation. It, thus became an order instigated from above and the public were obliged to follow up the directives. Thus, the process of gender-equalising of opportunities in society reflects the cultural struggle in early twentieth-century Sweden between the bourgeoisie and the working class which resulted in a “bourgeois” of Swedish society in general.

Women’s entry into the labour market coincided with the development of social institutions, such as kindergartens; the introduction of school lunches; the vaccination program, and the state’s active role in children’s education. These actions were all part of the same picture where the society created substitutes for “the good mother”, in order to liberate women from the domestic work burden (see Florin and Nilsson, 1999:23). It is important to draw attention to how the “scientification of daily life” came to be a strong weapon in the cultural struggle for equal opportunity policy. As kindergartens were nationalised in the 1960s, scientific investigations, which indicated

how kindergartens positively developed children's social character even from an early age, were given attention (SOU, 1968). This, in my view, might indicate a political control of research where research funding tends to be distributed according to subject and expected results.

I have observed, as a contrast to research results promoted in periods of high economic growth, how the media has drawn attention to other scientific investigations during the period of low economic growth in the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. The latter are often dealing with the importance for children of spending the first years at home with one of their parents. In my view, the direction of the "scientification" depends to a great extent on the economic factor.³ One example is that it is precisely in a period of strong economic growth in the early twenty-first century, that the Swedish government introduces the "maximum rate" (*maxtaxa*) for kindergartens (Sydsvenska Dagbladet, 2000-05-29) in May 2000, thus encouraging Swedes to conceive more children and making it economically favourable for parents to actively participate in the economic life of society.

Another important factor for the development of women's role in wider society was what Berger and Luckmann identified as the "reality" as social construction. This theory was established in the late sixties (Berger and Luckmann, 1967) and came to form a basis for the rejection of the existing sex roles. The idea is that, as social reality, in general, is constructed, sex roles are also regarded as being part of a social construct and not, as previously perceived, a result of biological differences. Thus, Berger and Luckman's theory came to revolutionise gender research and gave feminists as well as political authorities, favouring "equal opportunity" policies, scientific arguments to promote equal status on all levels of society.

A final factor worth considering in the context of the promotion of gender equality is the establishment of the NGO-organisation *The Swedish Association for Sex Education* (RFSU). The organisation regards itself as a pioneer for "sexual and reproductive health and rights" (RFSU, 2000). It has further played a part in legislative changes promoting women's entrance to the labour market, introducing compulsory sex education in schools (1955), contraceptives to be sold without a special licence, and women's free right of abortion up to

³ For argumentations for the economic factor's role in the promotion of female emancipation, see Hwitfelt, 1982.

the 18th week of pregnancy (RFSU, 2000). The role of the sexual revolution with the coming of “the pill” in the early sixties and the right of free abortion have to be regarded as main factors in the liberation of women, now able to control their own reproduction patterns. Thus, the work of the RFSU should not be underestimated in the discussion of the Swedish *jämställdhet*.

Swedish society can be seen as having gone through a homogenisation process on many levels. On the one hand the “bourgeoisening” of Swedish society, mainly through the device of “the People’s Home”, created a certain homogeneity within society. On the other, at a later stage, the governmental policy of *jämställdhet* came to create a gender homogeneity which has grown to be one of the main characteristics of Swedish society. The strong “equal opportunities” ideal which, although unintentionally, has turned into a strong notion of “gender equality”, culminated in the establishment of the Office of the Equal Opportunities with an Ombudsman (*jämställdhetsombudsman*) in 1980.

As a starting-point for a discussion on how the homogenisation on various levels of society affects Muslims living in Sweden I will look into some aspects of cultural encounters (*kulturmöten*) in multi-cultural societies and how these encounters often might lead to varying degrees of cultural *creolisation*.

Cultural Encounters

The Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz explains cultural *creolisation*, in the sense that various cultural traits are fused together, as a continuous flow between the centre and periphery (Hannerz, 1992). Even when speaking in terms of “western localism” as the “Standard” or the “Centre”, thus indicating a flow mostly from the centre to the periphery, it might still be a cultural *creolisation* as sub-cultures adapt cultural traits from the centre. Edward Said sees such a fusion of cultural manifestations as a common trait in all cultural units, as he states that “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (1993:xxix).

If we look at Muslim history, Muslims’ religious conceptions have, obviously, been influenced by various cultural experiences. During the first three centuries of Islamic history, Muslims conquered great

parts of the world. As Islam spread in the period of formation, Islamic theology and legislation came, in a *creolisation* process, to be influenced both by cultural expressions in the various regions as well as by individual differences of scholars.⁴ The aspect of change, particularly in social issues, was prominent in early Islamic legislation, but, with the establishment of a body of Islamic legislation in the tenth to the eleventh century, Islamic legal as well as intellectual ideas, to a large extent, stagnated.

It was not until the advent of western colonialism of the Muslim World that new intellectual ideas emerged as a consequence of the cultural encounter between “Islam” and “the West”. Thus, as a consequence of colonialism, in the nineteenth century, the *salafyya* movement, consisting of Muslim intellectual reformers started to question the existing frames for Islamic thinking. “Islam”, for the nineteenth century reformers, came to be a dynamic concept with the reinterpretations of social issues in the Islamic sources, the Qur’an and the hadiths, as the main device. The law-schools with their legal tools came to be regarded as suitable for their own particular time, but hardly sufficient for the developing world. The notion of “returning to the pure sources” was stated in the thought and, to a certain degree, activated by these reformers. An example is Muhammad Abduh’s commentary on the Qur’an, *tafsir al-manar*, where he expresses that polygyny, which is well-accepted by the Islamic Law-schools, “is in contrast to the original nature of marriage” (Abduh [n.d.] [vol. IV]:350 [translation mine]). However, since he stresses, at the same time, the need for the polygyny option to remain open in case of necessity, such as in times of war or if the woman is infertile, he suggests that the rulers in each country should legislate according to specific circumstances. In this particular case, Abduh has surpassed the legislation of the four law-schools, where polygyny is regarded as a right for men without any specific conditions linked to it. By understanding and interpreting social issues in the Islamic sources in

⁴ The theological struggle between, for instance, the Mu’tazila and the Asharites, and the legal struggle between the scholars, who promoted human reasoning and personal opinions (*ahl ar-ra’i*), and the Traditionalists (*ahl al-hadith*), indicates how the Islamic sources came to be interpreted through cultural filters blended with scholars’ personal opinions. Moreover, the establishment of the Four Schools of Islamic Law, the Maliki, the Hanafi, the Shafi’i, and the Hanbali law-schools, shows how the scholarly differences were accepted within the frame of Islamic thinking as there existed a broad acceptance in between the various legal directions.

the light of his particular society and his particular outlook, Abduh's conclusion came to be different to that of previous scholars who were coloured by *their* specific cultural experiences and expressions.

In the last half of the twentieth century Muslims have followed up the early reformers' notion of "returning to the sources". However, the successors of the *salafyya* movement have split into mainly two directions. At one end of the scale we find the trend of a rigid following of the Islamic texts interpreted through a patriarchal socio-political pattern, such as the *salafi* trend. Few Muslims actually adhere to such a trend, but its followers are active in European society, particularly in residential segregated areas. The other direction is more flexible, moving towards contextual differences and accepting to a certain extent, that a *creolisation* of ideas has to be an outcome of the cultural encounter between "Islam" and "the West". An example on the latter is the scholarship of the Sudanese lawyer Hasan al-Turabi. In 1973 he wrote a small booklet, *Women in Islam and Muslim Society (al-mar'a bayna ta'lim ad-din wa taqalid al-mujtama')*, which was published in Sudan. al-Turabi was part of the Islamic movement in Sudan and, as he pursued his post-graduate education in France and Britain in the nineteen sixties, he was obviously influenced by the struggle for women's rights in western society at that time. A similar example is the Egyptian-Canadian scholar, Jamal Badawi, whose book, *Gender Equity in Islam*, has become widespread in Muslim communities in western countries. Badawi's discussion indicates that gender issues within the frame of the Declaration of Human Rights have influenced his scholarship. Both these scholars have an audience among Muslim women in Sweden.

Similarly, as the cultural encounter with "the West" played a part in the emergence of new intellectual ideas in the nineteenth century Muslim World, al-Turabi's and Badawi's twentieth century's cultural encounters with western society in general, and western intellectuals in particular, obviously play a part in their Islamic thinking. The cultural encounters seem to cause new ideas to be formulated within the Islamic framework and point at a *creolisation process* of ideas.

It is in this framework of change in the cultural encounter between various Muslim cultures and Swedish society that I will discuss how the policy of *jämställdhet*, as a basic code of Swedish society, influences Muslim gender relations and the role of Muslim women in Muslim communities as well as in the majority society. Although both reform trends, referred to above, are represented in Sweden, I chose to deal

with the direction which promotes contextual changes, as this trend is, by far, the biggest and also has an influence on the mainstream Muslims in Sweden. It is also within this camp that the independent Muslim organisations are found. I will consider two issues; firstly, Muslim women's organisations, and, secondly, ideas on integration promoted by women in these organisations, indicating how Swedish cultural traits tend to affect Muslim's perceptions and attitudes, as well as their actual practice.⁵

Muslim Women's Organisations

As in other Western European countries, Muslim organisation activities in Sweden tend to follow ethnic and national boundaries. As within Muslim national and ethnic communities, due to ideological differences, there might be more than one organisation, so, rarely do various ethnic communities join each other in Muslim organisations. An exception is the Arabic-speaking community where ethnic groups such as Berbers and Kurds, and various national groups, might have common activities, but, even there, the tendency is to find divisions along ethnic and national lines. Furthermore, similar to Muslim organisations in other parts of the world, within the established organisations in Sweden men dominate leadership positions, and women's activities often run parallel to the main activities.

In 1984, the first Muslim women's association in Sweden, *The Islamic Women's Association*, was established in Gothenburg, the second biggest town in Sweden, and during the nineties more independent Muslim women's organisations mushroomed all over Sweden. It is important to be aware of the fact that pioneers of the Muslim women's organisations were converts from the Nordic countries. Convert women were also active as pioneers in establishing the Islamic Magazine *Salaam* in the 1980s. Even now, as the magazine, to a great extent, has come to be dominated by men, women converts still play a part in its issues. Many immigrant Muslim women also participate in Islamic activities and many of them are active members in women's organisations, as well as in male-dominated

⁵ The empirical material is built on participant observation in various Muslim women's associations and organisations, and on interviews and discussions with immigrant Muslim women and female Muslim converts.

organisations. In the Muslim women's organisations, Arab, Somali, Turkish, Pakistani, Albanian, and Bosnian women work together with converted Scandinavian women.

It is interesting to note that divorced and non-married Muslim women, both converts and immigrants, have been active particularly in the early establishment of female Muslim organisations. There seem to be three main reasons for this.⁶ Firstly, these women have fewer domestic responsibilities and can thus freely devote their time to Islamic activities. Secondly, as Muslims value family life highly, a women's organisation is a way to establish a wider family life for single and divorced women and their prospective children. A third factor is that women's activities in male-dominated Muslim organisations around the world are often conducted by women related, in one way or another, to leading men in the organisations (Roald, 1994). Single and divorced women, therefore, hardly find their place in such organisations.

In this context, the question to raise is whether Muslim female organisations were established as a reaction to male dominance in the main organisations or whether there are other reasons behind their establishments. I put this question to one of the founders of the International Muslim Women's Association in Malmö, a town in the south of Sweden with a high percentage of Muslim immigrants. Her answer was that, as few Muslim women are active participants in the society, in general, and in Muslim activities, in particular, it is important to gather those who are active in order to effectively work for Muslim women's interests. According to her, the greatest obstacle to Muslim women's activities is that, as Muslim women often follow their husbands in organisational issues, there are few active women within each organisation. Moreover, as men or even organisations come into conflict with each other, women are dragged into these conflicts and, as a result, women stop having contact with each other. She stated that to establish an independent women's association was the only solution to this problem. Through the association women have managed to gather women from various ethnic and national communities, and even from various religious directions. In *The International Muslim Women's Association in Malmö*, Turkish, Bosnian, Somali, and Arab women meet together with Scandinavian converts, and both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims participate

⁶ Interviews with Muslim women in women's organisations.

in the association's activities. "This", she says, "is a unique situation not only for Sweden as such but for the whole world."

I believe she is right about uniting various religious directions in the association. However, with regard to internalisation, many of the women's associations in Europe, in general, and in Sweden, in particular, have similar experiences. In Muslim women's activities in Sweden, women of various nationalities gather. There is, however, a domination of Swedish converts in many of the women's organisations. This might suggest that female Swedish converts have a primary socialisation with *jämställdhet* as a basic pattern, and they are, therefore, trained to take responsibility in a different fashion from Muslim immigrant women. However, many of those immigrant women who are active in the women organisations frequently speak the Swedish language well. In addition, they are often integrated in Swedish society in the sense of being part of the paid labour-force. This is in contrast to the main pattern of Muslims in Sweden, where many Muslims neither speak the Swedish language well, nor are integrated into the majority society's labour-market.

The issue is, thus, whether this is an affect of female organisation, in general, or whether it is only a matter that those immigrant women who, in any case, would be more active on many social levels are drawn to such organisations. In my discussions I brought up the issue and many immigrant women claimed that it was because of the merits of the women's organisations that they had achieved this position in society. Their fluency in the Swedish language improved because, in the Muslim women's organisations, Swedish was the main language used in contrast to the organisations with male leadership, which perpetuated their ethnic languages. Second, according to them, the women's organisations promoted the ideal of integration to a much larger extent than the male-dominated organisations and they thus felt motivated to be part of larger society.

The organisational pattern of Muslim women in Sweden, where women, to a great extent, tend to organise themselves independently from male organisations, reflects, on the one hand, the effect of a society built on the principle of equal opportunities. Women are socialised into shared responsibilities with men on all levels of society and, furthermore, they are able to work organisationally independent from men. As Muslim women have had some difficulties with achieving responsibilities within Muslim communities in Europe, in general, and as they also have felt that the male leadership has

tried to control female activities within the big organisations,⁷ the establishment of independent associations might be regarded as “western” reaction to male domination. However, as the women’s organisational pattern varies from one European society to another, the particular Muslim pattern in Sweden reflects a tendency towards Muslims acting in a “Swedish” way. Swedish society has a tradition of women establishing own organisations as well as female Confederations (*riksorganisationer*) which have direct contact with the authorities. One example is the Organisation of Housewives (*Husmodersförbundet*) which established its Confederation in 1919. Another example is the idea of a women’s political party which emerged in the late twentieth century. Although the party never actually materialised, the concept of political networking to promote women’s issues was maintained. Other examples are the feminist movements who are active both at local, regional, and parliamentary level.

Leadership

As mentioned earlier, the leadership of most Muslim organisations consists, more often than not, of men. The lack of female leadership is, to a certain extent, a result of male dominance, but female attitudes towards women in leadership position have also to be considered. It is important to be aware that many Muslim women who have arrived in Sweden, either as immigrants or as refugees, are generally, poorly educated. In the Arabic-speaking and the Somali communities, for instance, only a small percentage of the women have college or university degrees. Even if there is a trend for second-generation Muslim women to study after finishing high-school, these women often go into training courses leading to low-paid work, such as play centre assistants or day care nurses, courses in which no explicit leadership training is given. One of the reasons for the lack of women in leadership positions in the main Muslim organisations might be that few women have the required experience for such tasks. On the other hand, however, one should not, in the actual formation of the Muslim leadership, deny the impact of Muslim understandings on leadership. These understandings are based on

⁷ Interviews with many Muslim women, active within various associations and organisations.

the Islamic law-school system and on a specific cultural expression of the gender pattern in the Islamic sources, where men are regarded as the official actors in society, whereas women's position is supposed to be within the domestic domains only. It is, thus, not necessarily males who keep women out of leading positions, but also women themselves who tend to voluntarily refrain from such positions.

This view of gender roles has influenced the raising of children in the Muslim world as well as in Muslim communities in western countries, where Muslim women are not brought up to seek official responsibilities. However, it is obvious that there are many more women capable of being in a leadership position than is actually the case. One woman, who has a high position in one of the Muslim women's organisations, held that, as "strong" women are regarded as "manly" in the Muslim context, many women would suppress any traits of a dominating character in their interaction with Muslim men. She further expressed the view that in the women's organisations, contrastingly women can freely demonstrate leadership skills and be appreciated for such characteristics.

There has, moreover, been an official policy in twentieth-century's Islamic movements not to put women in leadership positions other than in particular women's organisation or in women's branches of the main organisations. This policy has, however, to a certain degree, changed as, for instance, when the Muslim Brotherhood issued a statement in 1994 called *The Role of Women in Islamic Society according to the Muslim Brotherhood* where the organisation defined its policy on women's role in the official space. In this statement it was declared that women can be in leading positions.⁸ The only condition for female leadership, according to the Muslim Brotherhood, was that a woman could never be the supreme leader of the state. Although this statement implicitly indicated that a woman could neither be

⁸ The Muslim Brotherhood 1994. The statement from 1994, which changed the Muslim Brotherhood's official policy of women's leadership, is interesting in view of Zainab al-Ghazzali's leading role in the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1960s described in her book *ayam min hayati* (English version 'Return of the Pharaoh'). I believe, however, that her important position in the organisation was, rather, a result of her particular personality than a result of a certain policy towards female leadership. The actual change of attitudes after 1994 towards female leadership and female political participation is apparent in the Jordanian example. In the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood women's political participation was not desirable in the early 1990s (Roald 1994). However, after 1994 women came to take part in official political activities through the Islamic Action Front.

the supreme leader of the Muslim Brotherhood nor of Muslims' organisations in general, it opened up the possibility for women's participation in these organisations' leading bodies. Many Swedish Muslim Confederations, which function as umbrella organisations for Muslim organisations, have close relations to the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. Local associations adhering to these Confederations, have probably, as a consequence of the statement, let women into leadership positions. However, as is the case in the Muslim Brotherhood in Muslim countries, women who have higher responsibilities within the organisations in Sweden are either married or are, in one way or another, closely related to male leaders.

Muslim Women and Male Leadership

As many active Muslim women living in Sweden have expressed a concern at the male leadership's control of women's activities, it is important to investigate the relationship between women's associations and the Muslim male leadership. The Swedish authorities' dealing with immigrants, in general, and religious minorities, in particular, is described by the sociologist, Yasemin Soysal, as belonging to a *corporatist* model (1994:37). What she means by a *corporatist* model is that "membership is organized around corporate groups and their functions. Corporate groups, defined by occupation, ethnic, religious, or gender identity, are emphasised as the source of action and authority" (ibid.:37). The consequence of this policy is that, in Sweden, the contact between the Muslim minority and the state goes through the Muslim Confederations.

As the Swedish authorities proclaimed the ideology of *multiculturalism* in the 1970s, this might partly be seen as a means to change the monopoly of the Lutheran State Church. One of the consequences of *multiculturalism* came to be a change in the state's financial assistance to religious congregations outside the state church. *The Commission for State Grants to Religious Communities* (SST) was established as a result of a parliamentary decision. In relation to the possibility for Muslim congregations to obtain state grant, the first Muslim Confederation, *United Islamic Organizations in Sweden* (Förenade Islamiska Församlingar i Sverige (FIFS)), was established in 1974 and, today, there exist three Muslim Confederations entitled to state grants. The Muslim leadership thus emerged from the Muslim Confederations whose tasks

were, both to distribute financial allowances to Muslim activities, and to function as the bridge between state and Muslims. Muslim leadership in Sweden might, therefore, be a matter of power, both financial and the power to define "Islam," in relation to the Swedish authorities.

Due to the Muslim leaders' position of power some of the women's organisations have chosen to keep outside the Confederation system, despite the loss of state grant. The women's organisations have still not established a female Confederation as would perhaps, be expected as a natural result of the Swedish society's influence on Muslim activities. However, this is partly due to one consequence of SST's regulations for new Confederations. In order to be recognised, members of the already existing Confederations have to give their consent. As these Confederations hardly want competing Confederations, such a consent is almost impossible to obtain. In this context it is interesting to note that some of the women's associations, which adhere to Confederations, have been told that their associations are not acceptable, as female activities should be within the framework of the general Muslim organisations. Even women within the Confederations' leadership have rejected some of the independent women organisations. The reasons for this conflict between women's associations, on the one hand and the male leadership, on the other, might be multiple. However, my discussions with representatives from various Muslim women's organisations suggest that, from the point of view of many Muslim women, it is mainly an issue of power and control. The struggle about who is to be the official representatives of the Muslims is a struggle about who might be able to define the issues at stake. One woman believed that, since the Muslim Confederations consist largely of men, they would have more difficulties with controlling independent female organisations than organisations with other men at the top. Thus, female organisations seem to have become a threat to the continuous existence of the leading position of the present Muslim male leadership in Swedish society.

There is a tendency in Muslim women's activities to adapt to the Swedish pattern of female organisations. The ideal of "equal opportunities" seems to have an impact on how women perceive both Islamic social issues and their own role as Muslim women. This is particularly true for immigrant Muslim women who actively participate in wider society. Moreover, it is obvious that the convert group is a major force in the trend of independent female activities. Firstly, as converts they are the ones who fully understand the society and

can, thereby, act in a different way from that of Muslim immigrants who, often, neither speak Swedish well, nor fully comprehend the cultural codes of Swedish society. Secondly, as converts are predominantly women, these women feel a sense of belonging with each other as being part of the same cultural sphere. At the same time, as they are often married to men of various ethnic communities, they do not find the same sense of belonging with women in the organisations of their husbands that are often ethnic-homogenous. Thus, the *creolisation* of Muslim women's culture, where cultural traits from "the Centre" influence cultures in the "Periphery", is obvious. Furthermore, it seems that converts, who are themselves "creolised" individuals, play a great part in this cultural mixing.

Views on Integration

Muhammad Anwar, a British Sociologist, has observed how "integration" is perceived differently by the immigrants and by the majority society. Immigrants understand "integration" as the majority's acceptance of their ethnic and cultural identity; the majority society regards integration as a way for immigrants to approach their own values (1987:110).

In my discussions with active Muslims, converts as well as women with immigrant backgrounds, Anwar's claim is reinforced. One leading woman in the Islamic Muslim Association in Gothenburg, Amina,⁹ who is also a convert, believes that "integration" means individuals should be active in society but, at the same time, able to keep up their identities. This means that, in the case of Muslims, there should be no obstacles in issues such as Islamic dressing, prayer and fasting. She further states that, in order for Muslim women to "integrate" into Swedish society, there have to be campaigns in two directions. In the first place, Muslim women in Sweden have to understand the importance of learning Swedish, and of study, in order to enter a profession. Secondly, she claims that Muslim men have to take more responsibilities at home, as women become more active in wider society.

It is important to draw attention to how Amina and other women take as their starting-point the importance for women to get into

⁹ Amina is a fictitious name.

the labour-market in order to “integrate”. This is in contrast to the specific understanding of gender roles in Islam where women’s main responsibility is in the domestic domain. I would claim that this view is due to two main reasons. Firstly, the Swedish society’s stress on “integration” has had a great influence, even on the Muslim perception of the role of women in society. Furthermore, with the dominating pattern of “equal opportunities”, Muslims tend to see men and women as having equal shares of both domestic work and financial responsibilities. The Swedish ideal of *jämställdhet* has, thus, become the pattern for gender relations even in a Muslim context. There seems to be a cross-cultural fertilisation in the women’s organisation between Muslim immigrant women and converts which seems to have created a notion of an *Islamic Jämställdhet*, even among immigrant women.

A second reason for stressing the importance for women to study and work, instead of emphasising women’s domestic role in society, might be the actual formation of Swedish society, where, due to the policy of *jämställdhet*, housewives are virtually non-existent, both in a terminological and in an actual sense (Axelsson, 1992).

It is further interesting to note how the homogenisation of ideas also has affected Muslims. The Muslim woman referred to above and many other Muslims I have spoken to, converts and immigrants alike, regard the woman’s role, first and foremost, as part of wider society. This appears to indicate how Swedish social politics have influenced Muslims to change the view of woman’s role from that of mainly being a mother and a wife, to that of being an active participant in the country’s economic system, a view which is much more compatible with the Swedish cultural sphere.

The second campaign has, according to Amina, to be directed towards the Swedish society, in order for “Swedes” to get a wider understanding of Islam and Muslims. Her statement has to be regarded in the light of Swedish society’s reaction towards Islam and Muslims, in general, and its view on Muslim women, in particular. Although, due to ethnic discrimination laws, there should not be any official reaction towards the Muslim women’s headscarves, many women have experienced discrimination over jobs as well as claiming to have met hostility in wider society. This hostility and reluctance to accept Muslim women in the work-place, dressed in headscarves, can be interpreted in many ways. One interpretation might be that the Christian commandment of women covering their hair is, at least by a literal

reading, closely linked to male power over women.¹⁰ Western society's rejection of the Muslim headscarf might, therefore, be linked to the Christian women's liberation from former Christian conceptions. This rejection might, thus, be a result of western society's own cultural struggle, reflecting secular society's controversy with Christianity.

A second interpretation, strongly linked to the former, might be within the Swedish ideal of *jämställdhet*. Women with scarves are regarded in terms of male oppression and, thus, they are regarded as manifest threats to the maintenance of such an "equal opportunity" policy. A third interpretation is, of course, the present role of Muslims as western society's scapegoats, a role they have inherited from, among others, Jews, Communists, and homosexuals.

For Amina "integration" means that people should be active in society but, at the same time, able to keep up their identity in matters such as dress and prayer. Representatives from Swedish society, however, tend to look at integration differently. One example is the reaction towards headscarves. Another example is happening which is a direct consequence of both the ideal of "equal opportunities" and the homogenisation of Swedish society to adhere to such an ideal. In June 2000, one of the female MPs, belonging to the Social Democratic Party, notified the Office of Equal Opportunities that the newly-opened mosque in Stockholm discriminated against women as women had to pray in a separate room. Although the Ombudsman for Equal Opportunity dismissed the case, the media took note and several reports were made in connection with the notification.

It is of interest to note how the Social Democratic MP actually looked at the matter as women "not being allowed to" enter the main prayer-hall. However, by looking at the matter the other way around, men are actually, not unconditionally, allowed to enter the women's prayer-room. As women in the early days of Islam, according to the Islamic sources, prayed in the same room as that of men, it is a later jurisprudential development that women have been given their own prayer-rooms. The reasons might be many; for instance convenience, as women can feel free to breast-feed, or show their faces if they wear a face-cover. It might also be a male preference in later Islamic legislation of keeping women out of view during

¹⁰ Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter eleven. For interpretations of Paulus in 19th century Sweden, see Hammar, 1999.

prayer, as a Muslim attitude towards women has been that of women as sexual temptresses. Despite such a view, which gained ground in Muslim society, it is rejected by Muslim feminist theologians (Roald, 1998; 2001). Whatever the reason behind men and women praying in different rooms, there is no prohibition in the Islamic sources for women to enter and pray behind the men in the main prayer-hall.

The notification to the Ombudsman for Equal Opportunities in Muslim prayer processes is a good example of how Swedish society, and, particularly, the Social Democratic policy, promotes “integration” where Muslims should be brought nearer to the ideology of the majority society. Although this incident was not an official Social Democratic political action, it indicates a tendency which is obvious within society at large. “When in Rome, do as the Roman do”, is a tendency which, in my view, is an outcome of the homogenisation process of Swedish society.

Post 11th of September 2001

Linked to reactions on Muslim women’s headscarves and on gender segregation in mosques are the Swedish reactions to the 11th of September terrorist attacks in the United States. Muslims in many parts of the non-Muslim world have been persecuted in one way or another after 11th of September. I would, however, claim that, in Sweden, the reaction towards Muslims has, to a certain extent, been in line with the general Swedish official policy of conflict-avoidance. Islamophobic statements were expressed but they came, in particular, from the Christian right-wing group. It was interesting to observe how one of the most outspoken antagonists against Muslims and ‘Islam’, the Pentecostal minister, Stanley Sjöberg, in a program on Swedish national television in the aftermath of 11th of September was designated, ‘Taleban’, by a Muslim convert. In contrast to many other countries, Swedish media took care to let Muslims themselves speak both in television and in newspapers. In one of the big (tabloid) evening papers, *Expressen*, one page, designated Page Four, was devoted to Muslim writers, to give their reactions to the 11th of September happenings, during a whole week in late September. The Swedish media’s moderate stand might be compared to the Danish media, with its covering of the national election campaign in autumn 2001, where anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic expressions dominated. The cov-

erage of an 'honour killing' or rather a 'shame killing', as remarked by a Swedish Muslim imam, in January 2002 in Sweden, took a similar course. A young Turkish-Kurdish woman, Fadime, was murdered by her father as she had 'dishonoured' the family by having a Swedish boy-friend. Part of the picture is that a couple of years earlier Fadime had taken her father and a brother to court for threatening her life. The Swedish media followed a line of regarding the 'honour killing' of Fadime in terms of 'Kurdishness' rather than blaming it on 'Islam' and Muslims. This was due to the fact that other Kurdish women have been murdered by family members in similar circumstances in Sweden in the last ten years. The media made it clear that Fadime's family were not specifically religiously inclined and claimed that the killing was due to Kurdish traditions and Fadime's father's rural and illiterate background. Only a few reports in newspapers spoke of the connection of Islam and Muslims to honour killings. One of the national television channels, however, presented a program where honour killings in Jordan were portrayed. Although this program stirred public feelings, the situation quickly calmed down as the newspapers did not follow up the reports. All in all the Swedish media took care not to see Islamic reasons behind the 'honour killing' of Fadime.

In contrast to the Swedish media, the Danish and Norwegian media took an opposite stand. In both countries the Islamic link to the 'honour killing' of Fadime was firmly established. In Denmark the debate on Fadime's destiny followed the Islamophobic pattern of the media's covering of the election campaign in the autumn 2001. In Norway, the media started to discuss the 'honour killing' of Fadime in terms of Muslim women, according to sharia, not being allowed to marry non-Muslims. The debate continued for several weeks before it died down.

Summary

As Sweden is a society which tends to avoid conflicts by incorporating parts of conflicting ideologies and ideals, the authorities have made great efforts to integrate immigrants. However, as a consequence of the same "shunning conflicts" tendency, in Swedish society there is a residential segregation between immigrants and "Swedes" which might obstruct such integration in the sense that a partial cultural

creolisation comes about. As for Muslims, it is particularly those who play a part in wider society, in one way or another, who come to adapt “Swedishness” to a greater or lesser degree, whereas those Muslims living in segregated areas tend to keep to patriarchal interpretations of socio-religious and political matters.

The “homogenisation” of Swedish society seems to have its effect on Muslims, and it is particularly evident in gender issues. “Swedishness” has its impact on Muslim ideology due to the strong “equal opportunity” policy, which has penetrated all fields of Swedish society. Although most Muslim organisations, and even the Confederations, are affected by the ideal of *jämställdhet*, its effect is particularly obvious in the independent female organisations, where women’s activities cross the boundaries of ethnic and ideological differences. As many Muslim women, active in such organisations, are Swedish converts, with a primary socialisation of the ideal of *jämställdhet*, these organisations have, to a greater or a lesser extent, incorporated such an ideal into the Islamic framework. With the cross-cultural fertilisation between converts and Muslim immigrant women, it seems that an ideology of Islamic *jämställdhet* has emerged in the Swedish Muslim context.

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CHAPTER FIVE

EXPERIENCES, NEEDS AND POTENTIAL OF NEW MUSLIM WOMEN IN BRITAIN

Harfiyah Abdel Haleem

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the experiences of ‘new Muslims’ in Britain, that is, new members of the Muslim community, not born or brought up as Muslims, but who have chosen to accept or embrace Islam in their lives. Other terms, ‘converts’ or ‘reverts’, are used elsewhere, but I prefer to use the term ‘new Muslims’, which is gaining currency. I use it not in the sense that the people have recently accepted Islam, but that they are new to the Muslim community, however long it is since they accepted Islam. All the women in my survey were ‘new’ to Islam in that each was the first member of her family to accept Islam as her religion. The difficulty of defining who is a ‘new Muslim’ emphasises the nature of ‘Muslim’ as a religious definition rather than as a cultural or racial one, as it is so often mistakenly assumed to be.

This chapter builds on my earlier research, the first of its kind into the experiences of British women who embrace Islam (Ball, 1987). Survey, questionnaire, interview and letter data from twenty Muslim women were used in the earlier 1980s research. Other sources used have been several feature articles in newspapers and magazines, video documentaries, some more serious and sympathetic than others, and other unpublished surveys, that have pursued the experiences of ‘new Muslims’ (see Bibliography). Adnan (1996) provided the most useful study, collecting data from one hundred new Muslims, both men and women. With important overlapping findings, this chapter collates data from my earlier 1980s research, additional sources and the work of Adnan (1996).

The larger scale of Adnan’s sample may well reflect the growth in numbers¹ and confidence of new Muslims in Britain, as well as the

¹ I am not aware of any statistical survey to show what the actual numbers of

researcher's more academic approach and resources. In this chapter, the experiences of new Muslims will be recounted thematically, starting with their personal background and search, then exploring the family and social aspects of the choice they have made and, finally, presenting spiritual and social benefits for the respondents. It concludes with an assessment of the potential benefits new Muslims can bring to British society.

Personal Background and Search

Some of the women responding to my earlier 1980s questions had previously been practising Christians; most had no particular religion. Of the Christians, one was Catholic, two were Protestants, and one was from a West Indian church. All these had experienced some dissatisfaction with their religion. The Catholic had drifted away from it semi-consciously; one of the Protestants felt that her values had been revolutionised by Islam, from politeness and obedience, to worship of God; the other had been put off by the narrow-mindedness of her vicar in relation to Islam. The Afro Caribbean Christian said that she had never received satisfactory answers to her questions from Christians, while she did from Muslims. Most of the 100 respondents in Adlin Adnan's survey were ex-Christians, mainly Catholics, but I know of several new Muslims who were originally Jews, Afro-Caribbean Christians, or of no particular religion, even some atheists.

New Muslims come from all educational backgrounds, although Adnan (1996) found that 77% had reached A-level standard or beyond. The change can also happen at any age, the youngest I have heard of in Britain being a teenager impressed by her Muslim friends, and the oldest in their eighties. Adnan found that a particularly common age for becoming interested in Islam was 'in their twenties upwards' (46% of her respondents) (1996:10) when 'the spiritual self asserts its presence, and demands attention'. At this stage, people start to search out and form their own value systems independently of their parents. However, another survey put the major-

new Muslims are, but perhaps after the publication of the results of the National Census (2001) the picture will become clearer, since it is to include an optional question inviting respondents to state their religious affiliations. If it is then possible to correlate the religion of one generation with that of the preceding generation in the same family, some figure for change of religion may emerge.

ity age at 40–60 years. Despite the negative perceptions of women in Islam, more women convert to Islam than men: “Women converts outnumber male converts in Britain by about two to one and in the US by about four to one.” (British Muslims Monthly Survey, 2002:8)

New Muslim women practise all kinds of professions and livelihoods; they are for example, doctors and university teachers, writers, journalists, artists, craftswomen, editors, administrators, secretaries, TV presenters, schoolteachers, businesswomen, as well as being housewives. Some of my respondents were supporting, or helping to support their families, as their foreign husbands had trouble finding work in this country. The first question asked was, ‘How did you come into contact with Islam?’ From the answers to this question it emerged that personal contact was the main method. Many of them had met and married Muslim men. One had worked with Muslim colleagues, some had Muslim friends, one had Muslim students, whose ‘good example’ impressed her. Some had met Muslims in the course of travel abroad. Sufi Shaykhs had played an important part. Some new Muslims, both men and women, had come to accept Islam through Subud, an organisation built around the performance of a spiritual ‘exercise’ first experienced by an Indonesian Muslim. Adnan (1996:10) lists similar findings, the highest percentages being contact with friends (28%) and spouses (16%). She also found that ten people had had ‘strange personal experiences and dreams’,² others commented through personal quest:

... after seeking the truth since childhood—leaving no stone unturned.

Even some of those whose first contact was personal were convinced finally by reading books or seeing films about the Prophet, Muhammad or Malcolm X (*ibid.*:10), other aspects of Islam, or the Qur’an itself. Of this they said:

[I had] a firm conviction that Al-Qur’an is from Allah.

When I read the Qur’an for the first time, it was as if I recognised it.

So what was it that impressed them about the Muslims they met, the books they read, that made them accept Islam? Some, like the one quoted above, recognised instantly that they had always been Muslims, but had not known it—they were ‘reverts’ in a conscious sense:

² For a documented example of such experiences see Lang (1994).

It seemed so familiar, and the essence of the religion seemed so pure and easy to feel.

[I had a] feeling of having found what I was searching for, for a long time.

Others just recognised the reasonableness of the religion.

Islam makes sense and does not ask you to do anything ridiculous or which might be against your own set of moral values.

Some appreciated the feeling of community and caring among Muslims:

[a] feeling of belonging to a family, when with Muslim friends. Feeling of oneness and common humanity

Closeness, love, kindness, caring: these are the benefits I have gained.

I felt that God was helping me and had sent these wonderful people to look after me.

One felt the same sense of caring, but in a more spiritual way:

A feeling of submission and patience, a knowledge that even if things don't go as you wish, and you end up in terrible situations, you will be cared for and protected, and given strength to deal with life.

Some mentioned that they had found guidance after a previously aimless and undisciplined life:

I had no religion, no code of behaviour to help me in difficulties. . . . Islam 'formalised' my religion and spiritual life, gave it shape and context . . .

[I had] no sense of direction, proportion, perspective. [I was] untamed. Limited to the aims of this life. [The effect of Islam was] purifying and therefore the soul becomes free from the shackles of selfish desires.

[I had] no purpose in life—living day by day but not knowing where one is going—[now my] life has purpose, something to aim for [and] I can try to guide people.

Islam made me feel the need to discipline my life in a positive way and to bring about the necessary modifications to bring my whole being into balance. To set myself free from the false standards of society.

There was also dissatisfaction about the way British society expects women to behave. The following answer sums this up:

I think it looks for aggressiveness yet femininity, dynamism yet passivity, the ability to work full-time yet look like a beauty queen and

always be ladylike: in short, to be both man and woman—to fulfil both functions. It is unfair.³

Most felt that society would be improved for women if Islam had an input into British Society and that women would be:

... able to be fulfilled by living according to their natural strengths, and could give much more to society and their children by living as women and appreciating their rights and abilities.

Women would be liberated and freed from having to compete with males for success across the social spectrum, and from being used and abused as mere objects of play.

Women would not allow themselves to be exploited by capitalism and men.

Women would be less exploited and would be able to fulfil themselves totally as human beings. In a truly Islamic environment women would be allowed to participate and play their part more than they are at present.

However some of them had doubts about the way Islam might be implemented in practice:

I don't know—social interpretations of Islam vary so much. It depends on which 'school of thought' was in power.

I am not impressed by so-called Muslim countries. They seem to repress women into second-class citizens. I would like to see women treated as the Prophet, Muhammad (pbuh) treated them. This is a rare occurrence, even by so-called practising Muslims.

Social Consequences

Reactions of family to their women (or men) accepting Islam tend to be the strongest, as strong emotional ties are being called into question. One woman said her parents had disowned her, another was having severe problems. Some were 'upset', and for others it was a 'taboo subject'. Others expressed:

shock, horror, disbelief, wonder, and finally a very grudging acceptance, with little curiosity about what Islam actually is or means to me . . .

. . . shock, horror and anxiety (my parents are Zionist Jews)

³ Showalter (1991) describes the uncertainty surrounding sexual roles in contemporary Western society.

Some women were lucky enough to have understanding parents, but even some of these had doubts. One, whose parents had expected her reversion and had “seen it coming since I was 17 or 18” were still opposed to her wearing of *hijab*. Another said her parents were surprised at first, but now accepted everything. She even goes so far as to say, “at the same time they do not, at the moment, feel it is for them”, suggesting that they might one day consider Islam for themselves.

Nonetheless, eventually parental relations tended to be improved. Certainly, most respondents felt that their behaviour towards their parents had improved since they accepted Islam. One said it had made her “nicer and more appreciative with [her] parents”; another that she was now “proud to be living with and trying to care for [her] father”; another that she had “more tolerance of parents, more understanding of their feelings and needs”.

Reactions

The images of Islam held by most friends and relations of the respondents were thought to be extremely negative. Their descriptions of such images ranged from ‘not discussed’, ‘don’t know’ and ‘restrictive’ and ‘not so good in their eyes’ to ‘repressive, chauvinistic, dogmatic, cruel, women kept permanently locked up, and not allowed any freedom’, ‘absolutely barbaric, backward, even comic’.

Several others mentioned repression of women, for example, the image that Muslim society is “male-dominated, where women are repressed and are thus frantic to be westernised”. One mentioned lack of love and compassion and said Islam was thought to be “medieval, violent and intolerant”. Violence was also part of the image described by another respondent, which also managed to combine:

... wealth, exotic lifestyles, much sensuality, very little spirituality, with a very dry, law-imposing religion incapable of change for the “better”.

Another respondent described a left-wing image of Islam:

Many friends from work know more about Islam because they work with Muslims but generally have left-wing political tendencies, so the role of women, attitudes to homosexuals etc. are ‘thorny’ subjects.

One attributed blame for negative images to the media:

This could be helped a great deal if ITV and BBC didn't always portray Muslims as oil sheiks with numerous wives and Rolls Royces. This, I think, only adds to the resentment felt by the British, particularly in our economic climate.

Another disagreed, blaming "the disgraceful misrepresentation of Islam by Muslims themselves". A third respondent felt that people "don't understand, as Allah has closed their eyes, ears and hearts; they are already lost". However, one person did give her friends credit for being "intelligent, [they] don't believe propoganda. They see Islam as very restrictive in the way it is practised. They agree with the ideology, but extremists put them off".

In-Laws

Some new Muslims had trouble with their in-laws, who had more secular modernist, or traditional, cultural attitudes than themselves, and who objected to their religious behaviour. One's Arab in-laws objected to her *hijab*. The brothers of an Iranian husband kept turning up at the couple's bed-sit and taking him out drinking. One mentioned the pressure from parents-in-law to have children as: 'one of the main factors of our divorce'. Although Islam welcomes children as gifts of Allah, it equally accepts absence of children as being His will (Qur'an 42:49-50).

Most of the other women got on well with their in-laws, although some saw little of them:

I like them very much. There is considerable language difficulty, unfortunately. They live abroad so there is limited contact. I feel part of them when I do see them.

For some, relations are 'good, but they are not in this country' or 'very good, we see them a few times a year'. Three said their relationships with their in-laws were 'good' or 'excellent' and two were very enthusiastic:

I feel as close, if not more close, than to my own family;
I feel they are my family.

One replied ambivalently that relations were: “very close—all live together in one flat. Language difficulties exist, also cultural differences, but nothing insurmountable”.

Other Muslims

The Muslim reactions to new Muslims vary from ecstatic welcome to suspicion. All shades of this spectrum are liable to be accompanied by a zeal to educate the new Muslim and correct her mistakes, which can lead to a plethora of often misleading information being showered, more or less aggressively, on the innocent novice, and sometimes causing confusion and distress. One respondent described her experiences with Muslim colleagues:

I was told many superstitious things and given incorrect information from some Muslims in the early days. I still feel confused if I'm given conflicting information from reliable sources (books, teachers from mosques, devout Muslims).

However, as the new Muslims acquire wider knowledge of Islam, they begin to have answers to some of the things that confuse them.

Changing Lifestyle

The process of accepting Islam is usually slow and gradual. People learn more about it and are able to understand, accept and appreciate the value of the various aspects. Their own image of Islam and Muslims tends to be coloured, to some extent, by such prejudices as are described above, until they learn differently. For most Europeans, to say the *Shahadah* (declaration of belief that there is only one God, and that Muhammad is His Messenger) and admit to being a Muslim is, in itself, a major rebellion and break with society. Even though they may not experience hostility or rejection openly, they may feel afraid of such treatment and insecure in seeking to be identified with Muslims rather than the people they are used to, and who have provided the support for their lives so far.

One criticism of the original study, made by a Muslim reader, was that some of the respondents did not pray the five daily prayers (*salah*) regularly. Although this is a valid criticism from a Muslim

point of view, it does betray the lack of understanding (or perhaps lack of will to understand), amongst born Muslims, of the process of change which makes someone accept Islam. Many of the new Muslims had little or no religion before embracing Islam and had been part of the secularism that prevails in Britain. The prospect of being seen to pray was even more embarrassing. The other main hindrance to regular prayer was lack of time: pressure of work, children, etc. Neither children nor employers could be trusted to understand a Muslim's need for 'prayer breaks' and there were few suitably private places to perform the *salah*, which involved a series of physical prayer positions, standing, bowing, prostrating and sitting. Some were just too tired and so missed some prayers, others admitted to laziness, lack of concentration, being unable to put prayer first, and one said, in addition to mentioning her heavy workload as a doctor and a mother, that the need to pray in Arabic was also a problem.

In spite of such problems, however, several respondents did find benefits from the prayers:

It has made me see the hand of Allah *ta'ala* in all things, made me more content and patient, more persevering, more understanding of the working of the *dunya* (life of this world).

Faith and prayers strengthen me at difficult moments with the children.

Prayers make for quiet moments in the day to regain strength and think of one's own needs, inner and outer. They help in keeping calm.

Trying to be more perfectionist, making everything an act for Allah.

I am more content with what I do. I am not always waiting and hoping for something exciting to happen.

Even the use of a Muslim name can be an enormous and insurmountable hurdle to some would-be Muslims, because of the embarrassment it would cause and the amount of explanation that would be necessary, which many feel inadequately prepared to deal with.⁴ Of the respondents, who were relatively confident in their Islam, most said they did use their Muslim names both with Muslim and

⁴ These fears are not unfounded. Where the atmosphere is particularly hostile, as in Bosnia, even a Muslim name can be used as an excuse for persecuting its owner. Many Jews in the diaspora have felt the need to adopt names more akin to those of the people of the country where they live, so as to avoid persecution and win favour. Many Hollywood film stars like Kirk Douglas and Danny Kaye did this.

non-Muslim friends. Six still said they used their old names generally, and restricted their Muslim one to use with family and Muslim friends and one did not use her Muslim name at all. Under the prevailing ethos of society, religion had been regarded as something personal, to be kept private, and not worn as a badge. Several people who had accepted Muslim names and presumably seen themselves, to some extent, as Muslims, had reverted to their old names for most purposes, (that is, everything except when with close Muslim friends), preferring to keep their Islam, such as it is, a private matter between them and Allah.

In the same way, such women did not distinguish themselves by their dress, and even some more committed Muslims preferred to keep their *hijab* within the norms of European dress as far as possible so that they did not attract attention or distance themselves from their non-Muslim friends. Others wore more overtly Islamic clothing, tying their scarves in unfashionable ways, and wearing clothes of a foreign style, like the one who adopted *shalwar-kamiz* (loose trousers and long shirt) in North Indian style, and others who were given long gowns (*jalabas/galabiyas/jilbabs*) by Muslim women. This could give rise to awkward situations. One said her Muslim husband was embarrassed at her *hijab* because he said his colleagues would think he was forcing her to wear it, whereas it was actually her choice not his. Another said her father was afraid that if she wore *hijab* she would be attacked by the National Front. Comments from passers-by on my own *hijab* (long gown and scarf) included 'Look Mum, it's a white Paki' and 'What's that? A walking curtain?!' However, most people expressed a limited degree of polite interest and wanted to learn more, unlike some of the parents who refused to discuss Islam at all.

One of the main problems experienced by new Muslims is the desire to educate their children as Muslims. This is also a problem for other Muslims in Britain, but less so for those immigrants who have been able to organise lessons at their local mosque. The state system integrates multi faith religious education in the curriculum. Some Muslims believe that through this approach, religion as a whole is downgraded to the status of an interesting anthropological curiosity rather than the all-embracing code for life. This is now improving with the Model Religious Education (RE) Syllabuses introduced in 1993, and other syllabuses devoted to Islamic Studies alone for examinations. However, there is still much ignorance amongst the

staff, with many schools using specialists in other subjects to take RE or Christian teachers, whose attitude to Islam may be negative. Most school textbooks on Islam in current use, some of them written by Christian clerics, contain factual errors and elements of bias against Islam, lingering on from the propaganda linked with the Crusades. The controversies about the establishment of Muslim schools⁵ are now well aired. There are now about 60 Muslim schools in Britain, two of which⁶ have recently been given Grant-Maintained status and some are achieving excellent results, thereby contributing towards the movement for more faith-based schools. However, the vast majority of Muslim children still attend state schools.

In recent years, with more reports of drug abuse, bullying, racism and sexual misconduct even in primary schools, an increasing number of new Muslim mothers have been so afraid to send their children to state schools, or disgusted with the ones their children attend, that they are trying to educate them at home. Sometimes they get together with other Muslim women and start their own nursery schools. A self-help network, the Islamic Home-School Support and Advice Network (IHSAN—an Arabic word meaning ‘improvement’) was started in the year 2000 to link such women.

The problem for new Muslim women is even greater than that for new Muslim men, who often have wives who are born Muslims and who know a number of *hadiths* and passages from the Qur’an that they can pass on naturally to their children. For the new Muslim woman it is an uphill struggle, first to educate herself, then to pass on the knowledge successfully and convincingly to the children. In Islam, the responsibility to ensure the education of the children as Muslims is as much that of the mother as it is that of the father.

Benefits of Choosing Islam

With or without the help and example of the Muslim community (and sometimes in spite of them!) new Muslim women continue their

⁵ This usually includes the issue of single-sex schools for girls. See for example Anwar (1982) pp. 17–18. Indeed this seems to be the prime factor in the establishment of many of the 60 or more Islamic schools which now exist in Britain (2001). However, segregation is not such a priority for the British Muslims questioned—it is the Islamic content and training which are the main things to be sought.

⁶ Islamic Schools, Brent and Feversham College, Bradford (1998).

efforts to keep up and improve their own private Islam. It gives them spiritual fulfilment, aim and purpose in life, discipline and guidance, recognition of having found something sought, answers to unanswered questions, purification from selfish desires, divine care and protection, growth, belonging in God's universe and, as some said:

Peace of mind: I can see things as part of a Universal plan, know our place and what is expected of us.

I have a completeness as a human being, whilst at the same time a feeling of growth and a closeness to the One Almighty.

I am at peace and contented.

New Muslim women bring to the Muslim community a range of skills and advantages not usually found in born Muslims in Britain. They combine the educational background and language common to the rest of society with the experience of being non-Muslims, and are, therefore, sometimes able to relate more sympathetically to those who have yet to accept the religion, and, hence, explain more clearly to them what the advantages are.

They have experienced the temptations of the secular society⁷ and have rejected them, but gradually they are finding that an Islamic alternative culture needs to grow up to divert the young from these temptations, which many young Muslims are not able to resist. New Muslims are, therefore, beginning to create '*halal*' (permitted) entertainment and education for children, with help and guidance from their born-Muslim colleagues, using the various media available at the moment, for example, books, song cassettes, CDROMs, radio programmes, internet, videos. This movement is particularly strong in the USA.

Those new Muslims who have a high profile, when they are interviewed in newspapers or on TV about their faith,⁸ also help give credibility and acceptance to the rest, and excite interest in Islam and Muslims in general, even though some of the coverage is sceptical and disparaging.

Two of the younger hereditary Lords are new Muslims and there are now several Muslim peers, Lord Nazir Ahmed and Baroness

⁷ See the caption to the large photograph in *The Daily Mail* (1993) article about Ruqayya Waris Maqsood's sacrifice of 'a whole wardrobe of clothes, plus alcohol and bacon' when she converted to Islam, and the main headline on the next page reads 'I miss going down to the pub.'

⁸ E.g. in the BBC TV series *Faces of Islam* (1997 and 1998).

Pola Uddin, Lord Patel, Lord Shahin. Jemima Goldsmith accepted Islam when she married Imran Khan, and sometimes gives interviews.⁹ The new Muslim son and daughter of Lord Justice Scott; the daughter of actress Pauline Collins, and the son of John Birt, former Director General of the BBC, have all figured in the press.

Muslims in Europe, seeing the plight of their co-religionists in many parts of the world, need all the reassurance and credibility they can get, in the face of ignorance and hostility, particularly evident in the press. Like the first new Muslims, the Companions of the Prophet, Muhammad (pbuh) in Makkah, many Muslims are forced to migrate to save their lives from persecution. With them they take their faith, and the new Muslims in their countries of refuge who adopt it, like the *Ansar* (helpers of the Prophet) in Madinah, help them to feel accepted and to grow roots, thus enabling them to contribute more fully to the society in which they live.

Before accepting Islam, many of my respondents had been dissatisfied with the level of caring they had encountered in British society:

Friendships with people were not close, emotions were superficial, for example, friendships with women formed only between boyfriends.

(The respondent meant here that male-female relationships are women's first concern, and only when there is a gap between one boyfriend and the next do they think about forming or maintaining friendships with other women.) Others mentioned 'pressure to leave home and live independently'; 'girlfriends always looking for boyfriends'. One summed up the situation by saying, 'No-one seemed to really care about family, friends or strangers.' New Muslims, according to their abilities and understanding, bear witness to all the values, insight and guidance that Islam provides, and to the great need for these in Britain, as in the wider world, today.

Summary

New Muslims, like other Muslims, aspire to live a life devoted to God, to attain spiritual peace and to follow the clear guidance of the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). They try to build good relationships with others as far

⁹ E.g. in the Muslim magazine *Q. News* (January 1999). Her conversion gave rise to another article on Muslim women converts (Narayan 1995).

as possible, even with their non-Muslim families and friends, in spite of the difficulties they experience in doing this. They accept Islam as a firm hand to hold, leading them and their children safely past the pitfalls of modern society.

They are faced with the challenges posed by non-Muslims' negative social perceptions of Islam, and Muslims' negative perceptions and suspicions of westerners, although there is much support and welcoming, too. They have to try and sift out what constitutes real Islam from the cultural accretions in other societies. They frequently have to explain to others, and to themselves, why they have made the choice of Islam as their religion, often in emotionally charged situations. They then have the even more difficult task of sharing their faith with the next generation, as do born Muslims, but with the added handicap of having to educate themselves about it at the same time.

Whether marginalised, timid and unsure of themselves, or more firmly grounded in their faith, new Muslims can be bridge-builders between the cultures and peoples of East and West. They can also be advocates, supporters and defenders of other Muslims at home and in the wider world, challenging ingrained prejudice and ignorance. Having found a way through life, and values they can believe in, they are in a position to share this treasure with the many others who may also be searching for a way out of their confusion—even for a reason to go on living.

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CHAPTER SIX

CHOICE AND OPPORTUNITY: SUPPORTING YOUNG MUSLIM WOMEN'S CAREER ASPIRATIONS

Barrie A. Irving, Vivienne Barker, Marie Parker-Jenkins
and Dimitra Hartas

Introduction

With the election of a Labour government in Britain in 1997, the dawning of a new age for social justice was eagerly anticipated. Yet, whilst there has been a noticeable shift in emphasis towards a discourse of social inclusion, this is located within a depoliticised agenda (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000), which is caught up within a debate around achievement.

Support for failing boys has become the new mantra (Epstein *et al.*, 1998), and the interconnected oppressions of 'race' and gender, have, to some extent, been pushed to one side as 'what it means to be a man' has become a principle cause of concern. However, Gillborn and Gipps (1996) found from their review of research into academic achievement of ethnic minorities that educational inequalities are still very much in evidence. Oppression goes beyond the ability to perform and compete within a social injustice system of capital relations: structural inequalities founded upon race, gender and religious beliefs are also of key importance in creating a world, which has value for all.

This chapter draws upon a major research project undertaken by the authors during 1997/98 which has been exploring the extent to which careers companies in England understand and accommodate cultural diversity in their provision of careers guidance to young Muslim women in their final years of compulsory schooling.¹ Careers companies operate both across and within compulsory education and

¹ This chapter draws on a paper presented at the European Educational research Association Conference in Finland, and published in the *European Educational Researcher* (1999), Vol. 5, No. 2.

the post-school arena, and are committed to the provision of individual, impartial support for the career aspirations of *all* young people. Careers companies are funded via the Department of Education and Employment (now Department for Education and Skills) to provide a bridge to assist in the transition from compulsory schooling to opportunities following from the age of 16 years, hence their potential influence should not be underestimated. Alongside their work in schools with students, teachers and parents, careers staff are also expected to actively participate within the wider community. This involvement includes the development of relationships with educational institutions, training providers, employers and local representative's organisations, which offer opportunities beyond the age of compulsory schooling.

If the career aspirations of young Muslim women are to be effectively supported and their interests promoted, the evidence of an underpinning philosophy of social justice would appear to be essential if careers companies are to be successful in this task. Careers Service policies will, therefore, need to be holistic in nature, yet also be multi-faceted to ensure that they acknowledge difference between and within cultural groups (Yuval-Davies, 1992), including religious beliefs, if they are to inform practice. As Young (1990:171) notes:

The politics of difference . . . aims for an understanding of group.
Difference . . . as entailing neither amorphous unity or purely individuality.

These are the major issues that are considered in relation to the emerging patterns identified from our research, and the discussion is informed by our findings.

Background

During their final years of compulsory schooling, essentially from Year 9 (13–14 years of age) onwards, all young people have a statutory right of access to careers guidance provision (Harris, 1999). In simple terms, it seeks to assist students in negotiating the maze of pathways and options available at the end of Year 11. Moreover, it is concerned with the development of career management skills that will enable the students to accept greater individual responsibility for their actions, the choices they make, and ultimately give them more control over their futures. A major underpinning philosophy within careers guidance is the notion of individual empowerment, supported

by a belief in impartiality, fairness and equality of provision for all.

Initially formed in 1973, career services were the responsibility of Local Education Authorities (LEAs). During the 1990s, as an outcome of the New Right's drive to reduce the power of public services, they were opened up to market competition (Wilcocks and Harrow, 1992). Contracts are now awarded by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) to 'private' consortia/companies who are able to meet their specification on price and quality. Consequently, the majority of careers companies in England are now run as partnerships, with the major stakeholders tending to be Training and Enterprise Councils and LEAs,² with boards of directors which, in some cases, include community representatives and local business interests. Guidelines, known as the Requirements and Guidance for Careers Service Providers (RGP), which determine the general focus and priorities of careers companies, are drawn up centrally by the DfEE (now the Department for Education and Skills). These are monitored at local level by regional government offices, and delivery success is measured against the targets agreed and set.

With a change in government during 1997, there has, in part, come a change of philosophy. The latest version of the RGP (1998) now requires careers companies to ensure that the needs of the disadvantaged are met as a priority, and to focus their delivery upon those for whom it can make the greatest difference. In order to develop and implement initiatives, and raise motivation and participation of young people at risk of social exclusion, there has been an increased necessity to work in partnership with other agencies and the wider community. In the 1996 publication, 'Guidelines to Good Practice in Promoting Equal Opportunities in the Careers Service', the DfEE lays out the legislative and contractual obligations incumbent upon careers companies, and provides examples of good practice. With the advent of the Connexions Initiative, the Careers Service, as it exists, is undergoing fundamental change. Currently careers companies are presented as service providers, and there is an expectation that they will be working with the local community, parents, educational institutions and other opportunity providers in the promotion of equal opportunity. There is also clear recognition

² It is important to note that, at the time of writing, the future of the existing Careers Service is unclear due to the impending introduction by the DfEE of the Government's 'Connexions' strategy.

within the document that different services may wish to target distinct client groups. The implication here is that the implementation of an equal opportunities policy does not have to mean 'providing the same for all'. As the Commission for Social Justice indicates, '... people will need different resources to be equally capable of worthwhile activity (thus) not all inequalities are unjust' (Commission for Social Justice, 1998:40).

Why Young Muslim Women?

Muslims comprise Britain's largest ethnic minority groups. In the most recent figures available their numbers were estimated as 1.5 million (Anwar, 1993; Sarwar, 1994). The National Census in 2001 is likely to show an increase in these figures. However, it is significant to note from the figures available that a relatively high proportion of the 1.5 million Muslims comprised children of compulsory school age (approx. 33% as against 16% in the general population) and almost 60% were under 25 years of age, compared with 32% nationally (British Muslims Survey, 1993). The Muslim population in Britain, therefore, appears to be comprised of a disproportionately large number of young people who fall within the statutory provision of careers companies. If this trend continues there is likely to be an increasing need for careers companies to provide a service which addresses their particular careers guidance needs.

Further, the term 'Muslim' describes those who follow the Islamic faith, which is a major defining feature. The Islamic faith binds the community, but also acts to set it apart in particular ways from those of other religions. Since the introduction of the Race Relations Act (1976) case law has provided legal protection from discrimination on the ground of racism for the members of Judaism and Sikhism by defining (both observant and secular) Jews and Sikhs as belonging to ethnic groups. As the Parekh Report (2000) and Weller *et al.* (2001) note, other religious groups, including Muslims, have not been afforded the same protection, meanwhile there is resistance to adding a reference to religion in existing anti-discriminatory legislation. The Parekh Report calls for legislation prohibiting direct and indirect discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, backed up by:

... a statement of general principles ... on 'reasonable accommodation' in relation to religious and cultural diversity in the workplace and in schools (p. 241).

In recent times the impact of British Muslim resistance to publication of 'The Satanic Verses', and the events of September 11th 2001 have resulted in growing 'Islamophobia' and increasing alienation from a shared identity with mainstream society. Moreover, the focus upon this single issue has served to divert attention away from debates within Islam itself concerning the position of women and stereotypical representations within the 'Western world' (Solomos, 1993).

Adherence to an Islamic way of life, however interpreted within a particular Muslim community, places certain demands that impact on how young Muslim women regard their futures. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that this is further complicated by the interaction of ethnicity, culture, race, gender and socio-economic class (Gillborn, 1997; Riley, 1994; Runnymede Trust, 1994), making the position of Muslim women seeking to enter the labour market a vulnerable one.

Because of their religious/cultural location within British society, Muslim women may find themselves excluded from 'mainstream' opportunities, due to a lack of understanding about their unique, and sometimes complex situations (Parker-Jenkins and Irving, in press). They run the risk of falling into a group that experiences difficulty in making a successful transition from compulsory education into the world of further education, training or employment. Parker-Jenkins *et al.* (1997) record that Muslim women have to work twice as hard to succeed as they are likely to face hostility at college, discrimination in the labour market, and may experience a cultural-religious struggle within their own communities. Young Muslim women could be viewed as doubly marginalised within education, as they face gender issues (along with women from other ethnic minority groups) which may not be addressed because, writes Corson:

... the study and practice of multicultural education tends to treat members of any single culture as an homogeneous group, with little regard for sex (1998:93).

A mediating role for careers companies would appear to be fundamental within the religious-cultural domain which young Muslim women occupy. Relationships with family, along with an understanding of the social mores of local communities, will be crucial if they are

to impact upon the lives of young Muslim women. It is also important to remain cognisant of the key role careers advisers play within schools. Safia Mirza (1992) found from her study of black women that:

... they were not only impeded by their teachers' assessment of their abilities but their decision making was fundamentally influenced by the poverty of advice and information that they received about job opportunities (p. 192).

It was from within this broad context that the research was undertaken. If careers companies are to promote social justice, and careers advisers are to be effective in providing support for young Muslim women, their policies and practice should reflect their career guidance needs.

The Study

The primary aim of our study was to investigate the extent to which careers companies and their staff are effective in meeting the career guidance needs of Muslim adolescent girls during the final two years of compulsory schooling. This we undertook through an examination of their understanding of this particular client group, and an investigation into the practices utilised as a result. We sought to achieve this by:

- providing an overall picture of practice currently undertaken by career services in Britain in the implementation of their equal opportunities policies, specifically in relation to the career guidance needs of young Muslim women;
- providing a pool of information, and examples of good practice if identified, from which all Career services might draw ideas to inform their own philosophy, policy and practice;
- stimulating further debate concerning how the needs of young Muslim women (and other clients at risk of social exclusion) can be identified and met through Careers Service provision;
- developing a framework which enables an analysis of current provision, and assists in the planning of future targeted provision for particular client groups.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were utilised in the study to ensure that there would be both depth and richness in the data collected. Following a pilot study, a large-scale survey was undertaken

with all of the careers companies in England (excluding those in the pilot and qualitative aspects). Responses were received from 47 of the 57 careers companies contacted, a very respectable return rate of 82%. This data was further enriched through a telephone survey of a sample of respondents who were undertaking activities specifically targeted at Muslims (although a number of these might have been at a general level).

The qualitative study was undertaken with careers companies in five areas of England, which have significant Muslim populations. Semi-structured interviews were used with a range of Careers Company staff, ranging from the chief executive through to specialist and generic careers advisers, and front-line support staff. All of the interviews were taped and later transcribed.

A number of key issues emerged from the early part of our research concerning ethnic monitoring, equal opportunities policies and the training of careers staff.

Ethnic Monitoring

In their recommendations for good practice, Cross *et al.* (1990) advised that career services should monitor destinations of their clients by gender and ethnicity. One of the major difficulties associated with this process relates to the categorisations applied. Through our interviews with careers services it appeared that the focus of this monitoring is upon the 'country of origin' (or in some cases 'place of birth'), which precludes identification on the basis of religious affiliation. Hence, it is not possible to record or monitor the destinations of those students who see themselves firstly as Muslim. This dilemma was recognised by careers companies. However, some suggested that the information might be collected informally and 'as necessary', for example through the individual guidance process. Nevertheless, there does appear to be a lack of clarity around the value careers staff attach to the collection of such data. In almost all of the careers companies within the qualitative aspect of the study, it was clear that the primary focus rested on individual needs, regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation. A view voiced by some careers staff was that they were not aware of clients reporting discrimination on religious ground when seeking employment. Further, that, as the Race Relations Act does not cover religious discrimination, employers would

not be open to prosecution and therefore the collection of this information could not be justified by the Careers Service.

However, we suggest that monitoring the destinations of Muslim clients (as distinct from the destinations by gender and ethnic minorities in general), could provide an indication of the extent to which they face religious discrimination when seeking to enter the labour market. Although religious discrimination is not currently unlawful in England, this information would enable careers services to play a more active role in raising awareness and challenging opportunity providers and employers to review their practice and make reasonable accommodation for Muslims to fulfil their religious obligations.

Some careers staff regarded the collection of data about religious affiliation as a very sensitive issue. They had found clients could be upset when asked for their ethnic origin and felt that it would be difficult to justify asking *any* client about their religion. Clearly, further research needs to investigate in more detail the views held by careers staff and their clients. Any decision would need to involve careers staff and the local Muslim community in discussions through which the reasons for gathering the information were made transparent to all and the limitations in how the information would be used clearly communicated and agreed.

Equal Opportunities Policy

The majority (85%) of careers companies in the quantitative aspect of the study indicated that they have a generic equal opportunities policy, and approximately 38% of these made specific reference to religious-cultural difference. Overall the policies were based upon the neo-liberal notion of equality of access for all and whilst recognising different areas of discrimination such as race, gender, disability, religious affiliation, nationality and culture, the policies then sought to address these through generic or, paradoxically, single issue approaches. Yet, as Minhas (1986:113) notes:

Relationships between class, race and gender are dynamic and complex . . . If race, gender and class are compartmentalised . . . approaches and strategies developed for combating racism, sexism and class bias will be limited and less effective than they might be.

Career companies which fail in their policies to recognise 'difference' between and within client groups, and the multi-dimensional and inter-

locking nature of sites of oppression, will need to ensure that these do not become bland, well-meaning statements of intent.

We suggest that issues of race, class, gender, religion, ethnicity and culture need to be considered both in relation to each other and within the particular contexts of different groups. Irving *et al.* (1997) report that, although there are commonalities in the experiences of young Muslim women, there is also a need to avoid the imposition of 'universal truths and solutions'. The application of a generic equal opportunities policy runs the danger of treating every client group in the same way, to ensure that each group receives 'equal' provision. Yet the DfEE (1996) guidelines on equal opportunities, cited earlier, indicate that services may need to target distinct client groups. Not all will experience discrimination in the same way. Siann and Knox (1992) point to the role which careers companies could play in easing the way for Muslim women, not least through being aware themselves of the complexity of issues involved. For instance, Brah (1992); Cross *et al.* (1990) and Nazir (1991) cite the image of Asian women as hapless dependents, likely to be married off at the earliest opportunity, as having had a less than helpful effect on the attitudes of teachers and careers advisers. Some young women may experience isolation when faced with a western, anti-discriminatory, philosophy in education and employment. For example, Bhatti (1999), in her study of Asian adolescents, found that Asian girls waged their own battle against racism and stereotypical images unaided by parents or careers teachers.

Careers advisers will need to be aware of their own potential for stereotypical behaviour in relation to young Muslim women and ensure that their guidance is based on an in-depth understanding of how potential areas of discrimination are interpreted by their clients, rather than basing their advice purely on a western neo-liberal philosophy.

Training

The quantitative survey in our study showed that the majority of careers companies (96%) had undertaken generic training in equal opportunities. Of these, 44% had delivered training focused upon the needs of ethnic minorities and/or religious-cultural groups. Much of the training has centred on legislation and the use of anti-discriminatory procedures. This is in line with the recommendations of Cross *et al.* (1990) who advocated that careers services should develop written equal opportunities policies and provide appropriate training

for careers staff, and suggested that training days may not be the best means of raising cultural awareness, as much of the information could be transmitted in writing. However, this presupposes that there is no need to discuss the information in relation to particular clients seen by careers staff. Moreover, if a 'critical multiculturalism' is to emerge as suggested by Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997), which re-sites the dominant western paradigmatic stances, this will require interrogation and understanding. We found that moves were being made to address this issue. Some careers staff had been involved in attendance at cultural-awareness days run by local community groups and had visited local mosques and one careers company expected to initiate cultural training, either through utilising Muslim careers advisers in the Company or through the Racial Equality Council.

It is to the credit of careers companies that so many have embraced the need for training in equal opportunities. Whilst there can be little doubt that it is essential for staff to gain a thorough grounding in legislation and an understanding of the procedures to be followed if discrimination is suspected, unless staff are fully committed to addressing the wider issues of social (in)justice, the training may never be fully operationalised. Furthermore, equal opportunities training should not be regarded as a 'one off' exercise or an annual activity, but as an integral aspect in *all* policies, integrated into a cycle of ongoing development which permeates all areas of practice.

Activities Targeted at Muslims

Our research found that only a small number of careers companies actively targeted activities towards Muslims. Further, this tended to occur where Muslims constituted a significant proportion of the student population in one or more schools. These activities were not solely for Muslims, to the exclusion of other interested groups. One careers company's response illustrates their policy:

We have not specifically, directly targeted religious groups. However, within certain communities, in effect our work to target ethnic minorities and disadvantaged groups has . . . indirectly targeted such groups, but not exclusively . . . the majority of Asians (across this careers service area) are Muslim . . . we do work with community organisations and a number of these are either explicitly or implicitly Muslim.

For the majority of careers companies, indirect targeting was justified through a tautological explanation that, by seeking to meet the needs of all clients through predominantly generic activities, whatever their culture/religion/gender, then all clients needs would ultimately be met.

Contact with the Muslim community would appear to be central to understanding the career guidance needs of young Muslim women. At the time of our study, only 14 out of 57 careers companies in the survey identified formal links with local and/or national Muslim organisations. Those interviewed related a few activities, either initiated by the community or by the Careers Service. For instance:

- Family evenings had been held at a careers centre to encourage Asian parents to become more aware of the Careers Service and involved in the guidance process;
- A Saturday morning meeting requested by a group of local Muslim women was held with careers staff;
- The arranging of visits by Asian parents to work places, (e.g. an RAF base), to enable them to acquire first hand information and discuss opportunities.

These illustrate evidence of ‘good practice’ undertaken with Asian parents in general. If the religious and cultural concerns of both Muslim parents and students are to be given voice, various opportunities for this to take place need to be created, and initiatives such as those identified through our study will need to be more widespread and available, both within educational establishments, and through the work of the careers companies with community links, if they are to become fully engaged with identifying and meeting the career guidance needs of young Muslim women.

A Framework for Action

In this study we set out to identify Careers Service activities specifically focused on young Muslim women. From our findings it appears that they largely concentrated on providing ‘equally for everyone’ at a group level, for instance in the provision of a common careers education programme for all pupils in years 9 to 11 in schools, whilst confining issues of culture and religion to a discussion with the individual client during the guidance interview. It appeared that

provisions for young Muslim women to consider issues of particular relevance to them in a *group setting* were not generally available through targeted Career services activities.

In order to assist careers companies in their assessment of the extent to which they cater for different client groups within their practice, we propose the use of a framework which covers three major aspects of provision. This may be used to assess the provision for different client groups and enable a recognition of different cultural perspectives beyond the traditional western model of individuality, yet allow for a diversity of views within different cultural groups. For instance, it allows for the accommodation within provisions for different experiences of what it means to be a Muslim. The framework comprises three premises:

1. that there are common influences which affect *all* clients living in a western society, whatever their own cultural and religious backgrounds;
2. that how clients are affected by, and interpret, these influences is unique to their own cultural setting;
3. that for each client individual characteristics, including the perceived relative importance of personal characteristics as against cultural-religious affiliation, act to influence them.

The first of these recognises that there are common influences in western culture, such as parents, family, education, and community, which may impact upon occupational choice, career decisions and future direction. A consideration of these influences has generally been incorporated into careers education programmes in schools with all young people.

The second premise, taking young Muslim women as an example, provides clients with an opportunity for understanding how they are affected by and interpret these influences in their particular cultural setting. Careers services therefore would 'unpack' what and who affect young Muslim women, including the issues and problems which concern them and those who influence them in their Muslim community. This requires acquiring an understanding of the Islamic religion and Muslim culture, of how this influences young Muslim women and is communicated and mediated through peers, parents, schools and the community. A consideration of each of these 'influence(r)s' and of how the careers company is currently engaged

with them provides a means for determining where and how targeted activities may be usefully employed. It would also provide careers advisers with an awareness of the complexity of views and differing cultural-religious issues in their local Muslim communities on which they can draw.

The third premise, as Marsella and Leong (1995) suggest, is concerned with locating the individual on a continuum of ethnocultural identity. It appeared from our study that a consideration of the relative importance to the client of their religious-cultural background was seen by careers advisers to be located in the individual guidance interview. An awareness by careers advisers of multicultural counselling and its applicability to careers guidance would appear to be of particular relevance here. For instance, a non-muslim careers adviser interviewed in our study expressed concern that he needed to understand more about young Muslim women's home lives, but felt that he had no means or time to undertake home visits.

Working Towards Change

Looking in more detail at how this framework could be applied in practice, and concentrating on the second premise in relation to young Muslim women, a range of key influences which have a potential impact upon young Muslim women can be identified. Parents and family, Muslim communities, school and colleges, and employers and training providers all influence Muslim women in particular, changing, and complex ways.

By going through a process of describing and considering the issues raised by and arising from these groups, and by looking at examples of targeted activities undertaken by careers companies, illustrations of 'good practice' and possible gaps in provision can be identified.

Parents and families of young Muslim women, as with any young person, exert significant influence over any career decisions made. Where an individual perceives them as relatively important, and where 'traditional' Muslim beliefs are evident, the uniqueness of the influence of parents lies in the concern they have for ensuring that their daughter receives a complete education in Islamic principles, behaviours, morals and values. Parents must be seen to be raising their children within Islam. Bhatti (1999) noted that parents from

all educational backgrounds drew a distinction between education for the 'other world' (religious education at home, in the mosque etc.) and education for 'this world' (school in a secular society).

There has been a gradual change in the attitude of some Muslim parents towards the Education of their daughters. Although very supportive of daughters who wish to enter Higher Education, some families may not wish them to study away from home, and/or in institutions which have no students of similar backgrounds, and/or with an overall social-cultural environment which is alien to their value system. This can include wanting to avoid engaging in mixed gender situations, socially, at places of work and of study. Young Muslim women may need opportunities to discuss these views which might be facilitated by the careers adviser.

A dilemma for some can emerge as 'educated' young Muslim women begin to engage with the Qur'an, and identify different interpretations of 'true' Islamic teachings which may challenge the cultural values adopted by their parents. As Shah (1998) notes for example, Islam does not set in opposition career and domestic life for women. Being caught between two cultures is further complicated where the older generation is seen to be bound by a culture which supports a patriarchal home life, presenting barriers to careers and education for girls. However, there are many contradictions and complexities within Muslim family situations as, in some circumstances, parents themselves may hold differing views about whether to allow their daughters to work. As Basit observes:

the spouse favouring the employment of women is usually able to convince her/his husband/wife regarding the merits of a career. This points to the important function of negotiation and persuasion within these families (1996:231).

Siann *et al.* (1990), and Siann and Knox (1992) found that young Muslim women regarded their parents as interested and supportive, there being few occupations which their parents would not agree to them entering. Parents, however, were often lacking knowledge about careers and opportunities, and it was felt that there was considerable scope for more information to be disseminated to parents. A further factor that might influence whether a daughter goes out to work is the material circumstance of the family (Bhatti, 1999; Brah & Shaw, 1992). For a number of families, economic necessity may serve to mediate cultural-religious considerations.

The interest of parents in their daughter's education thus might provide a space which careers advisers could occupy, enabling them to work with parents (and families) in a collaborative manner, advocating on behalf of young Muslim women and being in a position to promote their interests. Yet Muslim parents who are open to their daughters pursuing a career, can experience a language barrier in the acquisition of information about opportunities for their daughters if totally reliant upon their own community for social contact. The production of information in community languages is predominantly undertaken within those areas with large ethnic minority communities. In other parts of the country, those who do not have English as a first language would need to seek translation themselves. This reflects the necessity for careers companies to recognise the importance attached to active parental participation, and the value of regarding the wider community as a resource. If Muslim parents and families are to engage with both the career guidance *and* careers education process, careers advisers will be required to implement strategies that reach beyond the school setting and facilitate full and active participation (Irving, 1997).

Looking at what activities address issues of concern to Muslim parents in relation to their daughters and vice versa, our survey of careers companies found that few appear to provide opportunities for parents or daughters to broach their concerns directly on a group or individual basis, and there was little evidence of 'good practice' being widespread. However, amongst those that were reported was an initiative taken by a Muslim careers adviser who had recognised, and was directly addressing, the issue of Islamic education with parents. She answered parents' questions on the Qur'an in relation to women, work and education, at a parents evening organised by the school. Another Muslim careers adviser was making home visits to Muslim parents to discuss career and education options; and one careers company arranged familiarisation visits for Muslim parents to the local colleges. Clearly there are gaps in provision that careers services could fill in order to make their service to young Muslim women and their parents more directly applicable.

A second influence on young Muslim women are the communities within which they live. Muslim communities are diverse in their cultural origins, and members also have differentiated views on the meaning and impact of Islam upon their lives (Parker-Jenkins, 1995). However, the establishment and maintenance of the Islamic community,

or Ummah (community of believers), relies, in part, on being bonded by common social-religious activities. As Irving (1998) reports, the older generation is seen by young Muslim women to be greatly influenced by the values and views put forward by community or religious leaders. Islamic cultures are deeply rooted in the importance attached to the group, rather than the individual, and the issue of being accepted and respected within the community is very high on the agenda of many Muslim families. Actions are seen to be judged by the extended kinship group, and, for Pakistani Muslims, for example, to deviate from 'bradari' (extended community within Pakistan) expectations could result in the shaming of parents.

Enabling young Muslim women as a group to consider issues which they face at the boundaries between two cultures, issues that they have to consider in relation to their community and the impact that this has on their decisions about the future, including the role of women within Islam, would appear to be a relevant activity for careers advisers to become engaged in with the local Muslim community.

The position of women within the Muslim community is changing, yet, notes Ashfar (1994), contemporary feminist approaches can prove destructive in the home and outside it. Women are asserting themselves in a number of ways, and those who overtly question patriarchal dominance can face a hostile reception from family and community. A view put forward by Ashfar is that the male Muslim community should reassess the place of women, and give greater consideration to the need to permit Muslim women to choose identities with which they are comfortable. Careers advisers may need to acquire an in-depth understanding of the views held by those in their local Muslim communities, not least among their female clients, in order to engage with the debate concerning the role of Muslim women and careers. Events and activities organized with the community, which appropriately challenge the Muslim community's position concerning the place of women, will need to be sensitive to the needs and values of all. However, by gaining a wider understanding of the social and cultural milieu in which their clients reside, and the place of Islam within it, careers guidance may continue to retain an empowering philosophy which is strengthened if initiated and led by (ideally Muslim) women from a wide variety of social strata.

An example from our study of 'good practice' in working with the Muslim community was shown through a careers company seeking the views of local Muslim community's concerning their needs from the service. A lack of information and guidance about oppor-

tunities for Muslim women and girls was identified and a Saturday morning 'Lifelong Learning' event mounted in consultation with the Muslim community for Muslim mothers and daughters. This consisted of a series of presentations by a local Further Education college adviser and the Head of Access courses. A major local employer talked about in-company training, and Muslim women in professional careers, who acted as positive role models, spoke about their involvement in the community.

Education establishments are a third major influence on young Muslim women's lives. As Afshar (1985), Lightbody *et al.* (1997) and Bhatti (1999) note, education is highly prized and seen by Asian mothers as the key to better equipping their daughters to seek paid employment than they themselves had had, and as a means of delivery from poverty. Entering educational courses leading to highly valued occupations is regarded as a sign of respect for parents, and from it reassurance that the 'bradari' will see that the family has 'made it' in Britain. The aims of education in a secular society, however, are seen by some Muslim parents to be at odds with an Islamic education, which confines all knowledge within the framework of the Qur'an, and through religion aims to perpetuate a strong sense of community and family solidarity.

The issue of single-sex schools for Muslims is a complex one, linked closely to the views of those who hold authority within the community. Haw (1998) reports that some young Muslim women are not allowed to continue beyond compulsory schooling due to pressures placed upon parents by the community, others continue after marriage when it is considered 'safe' for them to study in a mixed sex institution. Again, a few careers companies have responded directly to this, for example in one area a careers adviser has established links between a Muslim girls' school and the local Further Education college. This has resulted in the girls continuing their education beyond the age of sixteen within their school, following Further Education courses delivered by the college.

However, some young Muslim women do not find the process an easy one. Parker-Jenkins *et al.* (1997) report criticisms of the state education system, voiced by young Muslim women, who did not feel that their teachers had high enough expectations of their abilities, and were not relating to their needs. As a result, they felt they were 'left behind' or had to rely upon their own devices. The support from careers teachers was also regarded as inconsistent. More recently, Bhatti (1999) found the same issues arising and points to the situation

where parents' separation from secular schools, in terms of their understanding of the system and the day-to-day school lives of their daughters (and sons), coupled with a benign trust in teachers to meet educational needs, can result in these children being left totally in charge of their own destinies. Collaborative approaches towards careers education and guidance would, therefore, appear to be essential, with careers staff taking an active participative role.

Beyond the influences of parents, community and schools, which can be seen to have a direct impact in conveying the culture and religion of Islam to young Muslim women, there are others which also act to affect their choices and career destinations. Activities which were targeted at promoting the career aspirations of, and opportunities for, Muslim women by employers and training providers were also sought through the quantitative survey. Although school-industry links are in evidence within many schools, the question to be addressed is concerned with how these translate in relation to preparation for opportunities experienced by those who leave school at 16 years.

Young Muslim women, in particular, face a myriad of issues when seeking to enter paid employment. Alongside the possible requirements that they should only work in a single sex environment, it is also conceivable that food, dress-code (Parker-Jenkins, 1995), travel restrictions and prayer facilities may act as further limitations. These are highlighted by the research of Noon and Ogbonna (1998:32), who found that some training providers suggest that the reason for differentiated outcomes at the end of training, between those of ethnic minority backgrounds and the 'white' population, is due to their failure to assimilate British cultural values.

Clearly, employers and training providers are significant gatekeepers to opportunities for young Muslim women who wish to enter the labour market, as they regulate employment practice, ostensibly within the confines of existing equal opportunities legislation. As noted earlier, one of the major hurdles for Muslims in general, is that the Race Relations Act (1976) does not currently recognise discrimination on the basis of religion as unlawful. The need to raise awareness of 'difference', change attitudes, challenge institutional racism, and promote positive action, highlighting both the ethical and economic benefits (Welsh *et al.*, 1994), would seem to be a key role for careers companies and their staff, yet the survey revealed very few initiatives in this field.

Discussion

The influences cited here, and the ensuing debate, is by no means exhaustive. For example, the influence of a young Muslim woman's peer group have not been included as a distinct factor, as the effect would appear to cut across the categories of influence(r)s of Muslim women identified. Further, it may be that other categories would come into play if a different cultural-religious group were to be studied, using this framework. Careers companies will have to consider whether their generic equal opportunities policies, which focus upon the individual and attempt to treat all clients 'equally', are able to accommodate the unique differences between clients from a variety of ethnic, religious, cultural and social class backgrounds. It appears from our research that a *few* careers companies *are* working towards ethnically-differentiated approaches that take into account the unique religious and cultural influences which impact upon the way in which young Muslim women manage their career paths. The initiatives reported tend to address many of the issues cited, when considered alongside the Muslim context described.

The telephone survey showed that most of the work with young Muslim women has not been part of an orchestrated strategy at an organisational level, but largely catered for through the initiative of individual careers advisers who have a high proportion of Muslims in their caseloads. This has led them to establish relationships with the Muslim communities; involve them in articulating their needs and, in partnership with others, seek to address their concerns. The potential for more formalised partnerships with different sectors of the local community, and engagement in collaborative action, raises issues around the non-partisan, 'impartial' position which careers companies may feel a need to maintain. A number of other careers company respondents in this research expressed a concern to treat *all* clients as individuals, and to be sensitive to cultural difference without specifically targeting provision for young Muslim women. They appear to rely upon the ability of careers advisers to be able to deal with any cultural-religious issues arising through the process of the individual careers guidance interview alone.

The majority of careers company activities are undertaken for a wide client group, which may include Muslim girls and young women. To illustrate, careers conventions are presented from a Western perspective, therefore a 'gap' could arise for Muslims (and other ethnic

groups) who may have difficulty in relating the information to their own particular cultural-religious background and affiliation. One careers company in the survey responded to a request from Muslim girls and young women by providing an annual event to widen their (and their parents') awareness of Further and Higher Education opportunities and to be able to discuss these in relation to their culture and religion. The effectiveness of events might be enhanced if careers advisers, (working with partners, such as careers teachers and/or representatives from the Muslim community), seek to ensure that clients' experiences are related to, and grounded within, their culture. However, separate provision, such as this, is not always necessary, feasible or desirable, in order to meet the needs of diverse client groups. Indeed, multicultural careers education programmes, which have tended to focus on ethnic minorities themselves (Giroux, 1992), could also enable young people to consider the construction of white identity (Gillborn, 1997) and how this affects the presentation of 'other'.

Summary

If careers companies are to move towards a language of possibility (Giroux, 1989) in which the needs of young Muslim women are effectively accommodated, it will be necessary for 'equal opportunities' policies to be dynamic, holistic and cognisant of the needs of individuals, but within the context of their cultural-religious location. Klein (1993) writes (about schools) that:

Before schools begin consultations [about] race equality, they have to be prepared to accept that race is an issue . . . The position that 'we don't have a problem here' is very entrenched (p. 114).

This was reflected in a view expressed by a number of respondents in our survey that no targeted activities were needed as there were very few Muslims in the careers company's client population, that is, that there is no need (or it is not feasible) for initiatives if there are few individuals from a particular client group. This begs the question concerning if and how the needs of these clients *are* being recognised and addressed.

By actively involving those who currently work with young Muslim women, and engaging with schools, parents, members of the Muslim

community, and young Muslim women themselves, the process of ownership and responsibility becomes shared as understanding is enhanced. For the policy to be successfully translated into practice, activities will have to be pro-active, reaching into the very heart of the local communities (Irving and Raja, 1998), both Muslim and non-Muslim. Consideration might need be given to the following:

- the careers staff involved with young Muslim women will require a sound understanding of the cultural-religious settings of their clients;
- the efficacy of existing careers education and guidance materials, in relation to Muslims, will require review and evaluation;
- culturally sensitive 'equal opportunities' activities may need to be developed;
- acknowledgement that racist divisions exist within the labour market, therefore strategies that seek to expose these and promote the interests of young Muslim women may have to be explored;
- the identification of 'key' community groups and the identification of opportunities for collaborative initiatives will need to occur.

Clearly, our research shows that a small number of Careers companies recognise that they do not operate in isolation of the communities they serve; the world of their individual clients; inequalities within training and the vagaries of the labour market. Concern with issues of equity is evident within the operating guidelines for careers companies produced by the DfEE and, in those areas of England with significant ethnic minority populations, progress is slowly being made.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

MUSLIM WOMEN TALKING: EXPERIENCES OF THEIR EARLY TEACHING CAREERS

Tansin Benn

Introduction

The focus of this chapter will be on the experiences of a group of Muslim women during their first two years as teachers in England. The material stems from a four-year study into the life-experiences of a group of Muslim women during their initial teacher training and early careers as primary teachers (for pupils aged five to eleven years), (Benn, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2002). Whilst the Muslim women would share many experiences with other teachers at the start of their career, their religious ‘visibility’, (for most had adopted the hijab, or headscarf, as a symbol of their faith), added dimensions of prejudice and discrimination to their experiences. These included, for some, feelings of isolation, disillusionment, of disadvantage, of being de-skilled and victimised. Although the subtle nuances of religious prejudice are difficult to identify, the weight of evidence across these multiple case studies suggests that professional development in the women’s early teaching careers was adversely affected by their Muslim identity.

Context

All the Muslim women who volunteered for this study had entered one institute of Higher Education in inner-city England after an Islamic studies option within the main Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree course started in the early 1990s. This was in direct response to the government’s directive to encourage more ethnic minority teachers into the profession (DES Circular 4/89). As the numbers of Muslim students increased they raised institutional issues which resulted in changes to meet the religious requirements of this particular group, for example dietary needs, the provision of a prayer

room, single-sex accommodation and aspects of physical education, for instance the provision of single-sex groups. As Head of the Physical Education Department, my interest in undertaking the research came about in response to the obvious need for staff to understand the religious requirements of this particular group of students more fully. The four-year study that resulted focused on the experiences of a group of seventeen Muslim women (predominantly of Asian heritage, with one of African-Caribbean heritage) through their initial teacher training course for two years, then continued with seven of the group for a further two years as they moved into the teaching profession. This chapter draws largely on data collected in the latter two years that became seven in-depth case studies into the life experiences of Muslim women in their early teaching careers.

The early teaching careers research focused on the influences of senior managers, colleagues, pupils, and parents on the Muslim women's personal and professional development. Underpinned by the interpretive paradigm, I pursued meanings and motives based in social action through gaining insight into perceptions and experiences of the Muslim women. Such a framework acknowledges the active role of individuals in interaction, interpretation and creation of their own realities, and is motivated by the belief that there is an intrinsic value in sharing multiple realities in the search for increasing understanding. Throughout the four-year study research methods used were qualitative, including the collation of over seventy in-depth interviews, diaries and observation data. The case studies used in this chapter capture life experiences in a particular time and place. All case study research seeks to offer richness and depth of understanding about particular situations, to open possibilities for creating hypotheses for further research, rather than seeking solutions to pre-determined hypotheses. As Bassey (1981, cited Bell, 1993:9) suggests, if case studies are:

... carried out systematically and critically, if they are aimed at improvement of education, if they are relatable, and if by publication of the findings they extend the boundaries of existing knowledge, then they are a form of educational research.

Whilst there were interesting methodological concerns for a white, non-Muslim female lecturer researching the life-experiences of a group of Asian, Muslim, student-teachers, these issues are addressed elsewhere. (Essed, 1991; Evans, 1992; Sparkes, 1992, 1995; Georges and

Jones, 1992; Haw, 1996; Mirza, 1995; Richardson, 1990). Although contentious, moving forward in understanding requires removing boundaries, sensitivity to power differentials and acknowledgement of the power of any respondent in qualitative research, for example to withdraw or withhold information at any point.

The empirical research was underpinned by a 'process theory of identity' (Elias, 1991; Mennell, 1994) which focuses on dynamic 'figurations' or networks of mutually interested, differentially related human beings. A useful aspect of the theory suggests that identity is continually shaped and re-shaped through interactions with others within figurations. This focused the research on the perceptions of the Muslim women concerning the influence of others on their personal and professional development, for example head teachers, senior managers, colleagues, pupils, parents, friends and family.

There is no intention to suggest that Muslim women are a homogeneous group (Hiskett, 1989). Respondents were differentially affected by the experiences they encountered in training and teaching, dependent on many factors including religiosity. Despite the diversity of experiences captured in the case studies, trends do emerge, such as the fact that the experiences of Muslim women wearing hijab were more negative and isolating than those who did not, and similar coping strategies were used to 'survive' the school situation. Evidence from across the multiple case studies will be collated in relation to key influential factors in the early teaching careers of the Muslim women. Further background on the Muslim women who volunteered for the case studies will be helpful at this point.

All respondents were born and educated in Britain with parents having arrived in the early 1960s, fourteen families from Pakistan, one from Jamaica, and two from Africa (who described themselves as African-Asian). The women had the support of their families to enter a four-year teacher-training course to become primary school teachers. Some remained living at home with their parents whilst others were mature students with their own families. The opportunity to study Islam within the course was a main attraction for most of the women. As the Islamic studies course attracted increasing numbers of Muslim students into the Higher Education institution strong networks of friendship and support were established between Muslim students, as reflected here in a statement from Amira (pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the anonymity of respondents):

I have gained a lot from being here because there are other girls and they want to strengthen their faith, they are in the same boat as you, you feel you can talk about your experiences and problems.

These networks were to prove important as they went their separate ways into the teaching profession.

Key Influential Factors in the Early Careers of Muslim Women

A number of interdependent factors emerged as significant in the early career experiences of the Muslim women. Firstly, those who wore the hijab had very different experiences from those who had not chosen to adopt the hijab. Secondly, positive or negative relations with others were dependent on the open or closed views of Islam encountered (Runnymede Trust, 1997 (see Table 1, p. 167)). Finally, the Muslim women found different ways of coping with their religious identity and its interface with the state education system in order to survive in the teaching profession. The Muslim women were differentially affected by their teacher training and early professional experiences in relation to these three factors. These aspects will be expanded through the following three sections:

- A series of short cameos through which early career experiences will be sketched as a precursor to later sections. Whilst the constraints of the chapter will not allow full individual case study accounts, this section will provide the reader with some insights into the diversity of experiences encountered as this group of Muslim women moved into the teaching profession;
- Influential others—a cross-case-study analysis of experiences encountered with senior managers, colleagues, pupils and parents;
- Experiences, perceptions and theoretical dimensions—a discussion.

Cameos—Early Career Experiences

Although not one of the case study respondents for the last two years of this research, *Zahra's* experiences are worth sharing because they raise questions of Muslim women being able to gain access to the teaching profession. After completing her four years of training she went on twelve separate job interviews and was unsuccessful. Zahra,

and other Muslim student-teachers, raised the question of dress and ways in which their adoption of Islamic dress and the hijab might affect job chances. Hana, a non hijab-wearing Muslim, had reflected on the difficulties her friends could encounter: "I've always thought about going for interview and . . . how other people are going to react towards (Muslim dress) . . . if that's how you are going to dress you cannot go for interview without wearing hijab . . ." Recalling one job interview, Zahra said that, as the only Muslim, she did feel 'uncomfortable' wondering if her Muslim identity had any influence on decisions that were being made about her future. After becoming depressed about her constant failure and lack of any communication about why she was not good enough for the posts, her brothers offered her the chance of work in Mozambique, so she returned to her country of origin.

Finding the first teaching post proved challenging for the majority of Muslim women in this research. The fortunate ones were offered jobs in schools where they had completed their final school-experience during the training process. This meant they avoided the challenges of job applications and interviews in the selection process. Others, who had to enter the selection process, had a more difficult time and became anxious as they saw their non-Muslim friends gaining posts before them, as suggested by Asma:

People are saying 'Don't worry—you'll get a job—there's a lot of demand for bilingual teachers and they want more Muslim teachers or Asian teachers.' Where are they? (The jobs).

Hana was offered a job in her final school-experience situation. She did not wear the hijab and did not consider herself to be 'as religious' as some of her friends, although she did describe herself as a Muslim. She had a happy first two years in the profession and was able to devote herself fully to teaching, with the support of her family. She empathised with some of the experiences of her hijab-wearing friends and recognised that life was harder for them. Her bi-lingual skills turned out to be a great asset but she did feel these were undervalued and under-used in the school situation. When she had finished training she did want to pursue her study of Islam and move forward in terms of the strength of her Muslim identity but the demands of the teaching profession did not allow this to happen.

Like Hana, *Salima* was an Asian Muslim teacher who had a highly successful final school-experience whilst in training and was fortunate

enough to be offered a post in the same school. The majority of pupils were of Asian Muslim heritage. She had a good relationship with the senior management and colleagues, enjoying the open, flexible management style and genuine interest and support for her as a Muslim teacher. This was an important part of her identity when she took up the post but it became more visible when she adopted hijab part-way through her first year. This created much positive interest amongst colleagues and pupils, earned 'looks of respect' from the parents, '... especially the fathers', and made her more confident of herself and her faith. Having already established a good rapport with staff, pupils and parents prior to adopting hijab, this move did not affect relationships negatively. Salima also felt valued as a Muslim teacher in the school; colleagues asked her for help in their teaching of Islam; they often came for help if there were any religious issues they needed guidance on, related to any of the Muslim pupils or families. At the end of the research programme Salima was happy to remain at that school. During her early career she was offered promotion. She completed her first two years feeling a valued member of staff and a positive contributor to the life of the school and the community it served. This was not the case with the other hijab-wearing women in this research.

On entering training, *Cath*, a black student of African-Caribbean heritage, had described herself as Muslim. A series of incidents and reflections had meant that when she left training and entered teaching she no longer called herself Muslim. She felt there were tensions between Asian and other groups of Muslims and that it was not easy for her in a group of predominantly Asian Muslims who regarded themselves as 'born into the faith'. She spoke of difficulties with feeling accepted or treated equally by some within the group. Nevertheless, she retained her love of Islam as a faith and was disappointed that she had not found the Islam she had been seeking. She remained convinced that the study of the subject had equipped her to understand the diversity of faiths and cultural backgrounds encountered in her first teaching post. There were different ethnicities evident amongst the staff and pupils, and the head teacher was black. The school community reflected the one she had grown up in and she felt completely 'at home', challenged but content, valued and respected, and able to flourish as a teacher at the start of her career.

At the transition point from training to teaching, *Jamilah* was the only Muslim teacher who was successful in gaining a first post through

the city's selective 'pool' system, (when teachers are accepted into a bank and allocated a school). Her unhappy fate in that school with a population of ninety-eight per cent Asian Muslim pupils will become clear later. Despite the appreciation and affection shown by pupils and parents, she left after her first year because of the prejudice experienced from the senior management. Although she moved to a second school, with a similar pupil population, Jamilah felt increasingly disillusioned with teaching in the state system. She felt that she was compromising her Muslim identity to survive in teaching and that she was not prepared to continue down this path. Coping strategies involved 'identity stasis', staying silent about her religious education, Islamic studies specialism, about her own lifestyle preferences in the presence of colleagues and about initiatives she wanted to start, like a lunch-time Islamic studies club for any pupils who wanted to attend. The state of 'stasis' (Menter, 1989), staying silent in order to avoid confrontation, was chosen as a path because of Islamophobic comments from colleagues and managers experienced in her early career. In an open exchange she explained:

... I am (overtly Muslim) because of the headscarf but verbally I'm not overtly Muslim . . . Sometimes it's safer not to talk about things . . . for future harmony. I thought it's best not to talk about anything related to Islam, since it may just result in friction.

Jamilah became less certain about the role she was playing in perpetuating what she increasingly viewed as a secular un-Islamic education that was distancing Muslim children from their faith. Jamilah left the profession after two years, feeling unwelcome, undervalued and unfulfilled, with more questions than answers and a conviction that the only way in which she could pursue her Islamic identity at that stage was outside the state education system. She was very astute about the centralising effects of the National Curriculum and the micro-politics of the school environment as is evident in the following:

I wonder to what extent a teacher is free to be the kind of teacher he or she wants to be since there are a number of constraints . . . a teacher has to work within the framework of the National Curriculum, school policies, established practices . . . and the preferences of others—heads, mentors, advisers . . .

Nawar was unsuccessful in gaining a state school post. She was rejected by the city pool, and, incidentally, was further rejected in each of the following two years. When she enquired about the reason

for her rejection she was told that her application did not say enough about multi-cultural education, despite the fact that she had revealed her own background of having an English mother and Pakistani father and of being a practising Muslim with bi-lingual skills! She decided to take a post in a Muslim school. At the time she thought this would suit her, since she had met some resistance to her Muslim identity on school-experience during training, which had reduced her confidence to enter the state system. When she found herself 'defending her right to be Muslim' she wondered if she could ever be happy in that context:

I think I would be happier in (the Muslim school) environment in the respect that I wouldn't have to go and hide (getting) a wash at lunch-times—explaining to everyone what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. The children will know when its prayer time I can just go into the corner and pray. I won't have to fight. In the state system I've got to do all the explaining. . . . I would feel more comfortable (accepted) in a Muslim school.

Two years later Nawar had decided that she wanted to try teaching in the state system again, not least for reasons of teacher status, acceptance, salary, rights, and rumours that staying too long in a Muslim school meant that moving back into the state system became impossible. After a third, successive, annual, 'city pool' rejection, she resigned from her full-time employment in the Muslim school, seeing this increasingly as an albatross, to take supply work in the state system in the hope that she could convince a school of her capability from 'within'.

Rabiah was resentful throughout the first two years of her teaching career because she felt she had been pressurized into taking a late post ". . . that no-one else wanted . . .". *Rabiah* found life as a Muslim teacher a struggle saying that it was hard to be a practising Muslim in the state system. It was not easy to carry out ablutions or prayers in privacy; she felt isolated and lonely; she felt she had little in common with her colleagues and, in fact, that their westernised staffroom talk was anathema to her Islamic lifestyle preferences. She coped by switching into 'teacher mode' on arrival at school, and back into her preferred way of life after school, keeping the Muslim network alive by telephone contact, offering mutual support to other friends who had trained with her. This was a successful way of surviving as a Muslim teacher although she was not happy in the school. Two years later she was desperate enough to say she was leaving the pro-

fession if she could not move to another school. She did find an alternative post at the eleventh hour and chose to keep working when she married in that summer.

Asma had applied for a teaching post through the city system but had been unable to find a job, so had accepted work with agencies as a supply teacher. For two years she worked as a temporary primary and language support teacher, in many different city schools, applying each year for a full-time position, leaving her curriculum vitae in every school and ensuring every head teacher knew of her determination for a full-time post. In that time she believed she was becoming 'de-skilled', as her initial training became distanced (she did not, for example, teach music for two years) and no professional development opportunities came her way. There was an expectation that she 'knew everything', even when she was taken on as a temporary language-support teacher. She had to 'get on with the job' in order to keep hold of the few opportunities that were open to her. After two years of actively seeking a post, *Asma* was depressed and disillusioned with the teaching profession and her early aspirations. She was seriously considering a career change when she was offered a full-time position in a school where she had undertaken temporary work.

Although these cameos offer only brief sketches they do indicate the diversity of experiences encountered by the Muslim women in their early teaching careers and serve as a context for the next section. What follows provides a thematic analysis of ways in which interactions with particular groups influenced the women's personal and professional development.

Influential Others

i) Relations with Senior Management

The degree to which the Muslim women felt welcome in a school was dependent on the ethos of the school, meaning, in this context, the atmosphere of the school created by interactions between the people who constitute the school, for example, senior managers, colleagues, pupils and parents. These interactions turned out to be much more important than the multi-cultural 'make-up' of a school. For example, in an all-white school one Muslim teacher was told that there was a quiet room that she could use for lunch-time prayers

next to the library, if she wished. This gesture of understanding made all the difference to her feeling positive about working in that school; her identity had at least been acknowledged. In another school, where the majority of pupils were Asian and Muslim, less welcoming experiences were encountered.

The management style of the head teacher and senior managers was important in making the Muslim women feel welcome or isolated. They found it easier to 'fit in' where there was a positive relationship between teachers and senior managers, open and warm management style; flexibility; delegated responsibilities; a sense of trust, ownership and of being valued. Salima's experiences epitomised the sense of self-confidence and professional value that can be developed with positive leadership. Where management was more autocratic and hierarchical, with little evidence of shared responsibility, the Muslim women often found the environment alienating and isolating. The degree to which their Muslim identity exacerbated these feelings is difficult to determine, as reflected by Jamilah:

... they might be reacting to you, but because *who* you are is mixed up so much with your religion, your race and your gender ... what are they reacting to? You don't know, you can't really say—if you try to pinpoint it you might be wrong.

Jamilah was aware of the significance of positive and negative relationships but was also cautious about ascribing particular causes of friction, pinpointing the complexities and sensitivities involved in what Mennell (1994) called, the 'filo-pastry of identity'.

To illustrate the effect one head teacher can have on career chances, one particular school featured more than once in this research. It was a school with ninety-eight per cent Asian Muslim pupils. During a teaching practice Zahra had been reduced to tears on her first morning by the head teacher who had shouted at her within hearing range of the whole school gathered for assembly in the hall. She never regained her confidence and withdrew from that practice. Two years later Jamilah went for a job interview to be told by the same head how the school had changed over the last twenty years since she first arrived. She added that some days she felt as though she was: "... teaching in a Pakistani village ...". Despite the warning Jamilah took the job. She spent an unhappy first year building excellent relationships with the pupils and parents, but feeling increasingly isolated from the predominantly white senior manage-

ment and staff. Amongst many incidents Jamilah shared her feelings about the incongruity of so many Asian, Muslim pupils being taught by so many white teachers. No colleagues had asked her anything about her own culture, background or knowledge of the religious requirements of the children, despite some real language difficulties with some infant children that she could have resolved. The head teacher extended Jamilah's 'probationary' period during her first year with inadequate explanation. Jamilah left the school at the end of the first year feeling no bond with the management or staff but overwhelmed with letters of praise and support from the Muslim parents and children: "You've been a great credit to this school—a favourite with the children and the parents and it's going to be such a loss when you go." (Parent).

ii) *Relations with Teacher Colleagues*

During training, the school-based experiences had been some of the most alienating and isolating for the Muslim women. In a relatively powerless position they were more concerned with 'passing' than with challenging situations which were clearly Islamophobic. For example, Fareeda was asked by her class teacher if she was "... going to indoctrinate the children" when she asked if she could teach Islam in the Religious Education lessons:

I thought ... 'indoctrinate the children? I am a teacher for goodness sake ... I'm going to give them information ... I'm not going to tell them what to believe ...' That's not what I *said* that's what I *thought*. I was really taken aback ... She had obviously judged me by the way I looked without giving me a chance to speak or anything—that was the most offensive thing that happened on school-experience.

In another example, Nawar's teacher spoke to her in such a way that denied her obvious and visible Muslim identity. In a conversation about the young age at which some Muslim girls were married and some disclosure about Nawar's own history of a young marriage and the subsequent birth of her four children, the teacher said: "How can these people ... these Muslims get these girls married so young?" She was simultaneously admitting and denying that Nawar was 'one of them'. Nawar's desire to pass her school-experience ensured she remained careful and cautious outwardly, whilst, inwardly, she was angry, confused and upset. Their strategy was to adopt a position of the aforementioned 'stasis' (Menter, 1989) rather than

confront and risk potential failure. Not all experiences were negative. Sometimes the Muslim women met teachers with a genuine desire to know more about Islam and whose approach to the Muslim women was warm and welcoming.

In their early careers the Muslim women expressed feelings of isolation amongst the staff in the school situation. Usually, the women found themselves to be the only Muslim teacher in the school, and, again, those who wore the hijab / Muslim dress found this distanced them from colleagues, for example from being included easily in staff-room conversation, sometimes feeling alienated by the culturally specific topics of conversation that arose, as explained by Jamilah and Rabiah respectively:

I don't really talk freely about what interests me . . . I would be hesitant to mention that I would be going to an Islamic conference—I just feel it may make people stereotype me as fundamentalist—whatever they think that to be . . .

What do they talk about in staffrooms? It's all to do with personal beauty—travel, hairstyles, clothes . . . those are things I don't relate to because of my upbringing . . . holidays . . . and TV—pop stars and actors . . . westernised *habits* would be a more appropriate term . . . the social life, the drinking, the smoking, the partying . . . the relationships, thinking of yourself—*independent* and being self-centred—compared with the community you would always think about if you followed Islam . . .

Although these statements reveal differences, the first being an example of 'identity stasis' and the second, polarising extremes of westernisation and Islam. they both reflect the sense of isolation experienced from the dominant culture of the state school staffroom.

Some Muslim women experienced early disillusionment in their careers, exacerbated by the lack of shared experiences or understanding of cultural differences between colleagues. This was a source of disappointment to some who had been convinced about joining the profession in order to improve the visibility of Muslim teachers, the experiences of Muslim pupils, and to dispel stereotypes and prejudices. Rabiah summarises feelings of despondency and powerlessness:

At college we would say—we'll go into schools and make changes—(now) I feel—what changes can you make? We are the lowest of the low—really—as newly qualified teachers. How important are our views?

Whilst any student-teacher or newly qualified teacher might share early career frustrations and disappointments, a number of Muslim women felt they were subject to greater barriers because of their

identity. Rabiah continued: “Why should I be doing so much extra to get the same chances as other people?” Jamilah made the issues even plainer: “. . . I feel I’ve got to prove myself more than if I wasn’t an Asian Muslim woman.” Inability to utilise their particular strengths in terms of their cultural, religious and bi-lingual skills, to make a difference in the school situation, resulted in many of the Muslim women feeling undervalued and unfulfilled.

iii) *Identity and Status—Relations with the Pupils:*
‘Aunty’, ‘Assistant’, ‘Mother’?

One really positive factor in the lives of the hijab-wearing Muslim teachers was the rapport experienced with the Muslim pupils. Some children were explicit in the joy experienced at having a Muslim teacher: “Oh, Miss, you’re a Muslim teacher—great—we’ve never had an Asian teacher—we can talk to you . . .” (Asma speaks Punjabi, Mirpuri, Urdu and Hindi). Many hijab and non-hijab wearing Muslim women had some ‘status problems’ in early career situations. The label ‘aunty’ was used as children addressed the women during their play-ground duties and passing in corridors. This was because the children associated the dress they wore more closely with their families than with teachers. They were also frequently confused with classroom assistants since the majority of classroom assistants in the schools involved were of Asian heritage. It was not just the pupils who fell into this trap, other ancillary staff also did in the women’s early days in a new school, for example asking Hana “. . . where the teacher was”. She replied, “It’s me—I am the teacher!”

Although Zahra never entered the teaching profession (for reasons explained earlier) one recollection of her final research interview, at the transition point between training and career, related to this issue of identity and status:

The three schools I have been in (as a student-teacher) the Asian children have asked the same questions. The three questions they ask . . . ‘Miss, are you Pakistani? . . . Miss, are you married? . . . Miss, do you have children?’

. . . Maybe it’s their conception of what an Asian woman is supposed to be or that’s her role—her role is not to be here (at school teaching) but to be at home, she’s supposed to have a husband and kids.

Her answer to all three questions was ‘No’. Zahra used the opportunity to explain the lived complexities of her multi-layered identity.

She explained that not all Asians or Muslims are from Pakistan, that she was from Mozambique, was not married and had no children, and that her first language was Portuguese. "It's such a different concept for them because they've lived in such a closed community." Zahra saw the need for more Muslim teachers to demonstrate the 'normality', rather than the 'oddity', of achieving such status as a teacher and as an Asian, Muslim woman.

Not all experiences of the Muslim women with pupils were positive. They were able to show empathy with the needs of Muslim pupils, for example, in changing for physical education or in groupings. Some tensions with non-Muslim pupils were experienced and some did experience racism and religious prejudice from pupils, which they rarely made public, as is evident in the following comment from Zauda after an altercation with a pupil in which she was called 'turban-head':

... as a Muslim ... I am going to get a lot of that—maybe—in the future, from children ... they didn't really see me as a class teacher in the beginning ... Sometimes they can be very negative towards you—they just say 'Shut up Paki!'—what can you do?

iv) *Relations with Pupils' Parents*

For the Muslim women understanding and interpreting relationships with pupils' parents took time. This is a facet of a teacher's work that cannot be developed in training when school-attachments are so short. Rabiah was very conscious and proud, in her early teaching days, of being a positive role model for the Asian parents coming to the school. They exchanged smiles and looks that she interpreted as appreciative of her presence and role as teacher to their children. Jamilah was suspicious of an incident that happened when the only white child in her class was removed by her parents within weeks of Jamilah's arrival as class teacher:

It crossed my mind that the parents might have been able to put up with a large majority of Muslims in the school but perhaps having a Muslim teacher was going a bit too far ...

In another incident, when Jamilah gave a child a hug for doing something really well as she was leaving to go home, she felt the mother looking on disapprovingly and attributed this to her Muslim dress:

I believe it is much more to do with the clothes you are wearing than the colour of your skin. Maybe the correct term would be 'religious prejudice'.

Hana described how relations with parents improved gradually once trust was established and their shared language recognised. With the majority Punjabi-speaking children she was able to communicate with the parents in their own language which, for some, was their only language. The attendance at parents' evening improved dramatically—with her 'queue of interested parents' lasting well past the time when other teachers had finished! The other Muslim teachers also regarded this ability to communicate easily with the parents of the children as a great bonus, but not many felt that these skills were fully appreciated by the 'system' or well utilised in the school.

Muslim Teachers Talking—Theoretical Reflections

Religious conviction and identity

Being free to 'be Muslim' as a teacher in the state education system became an issue where religious conviction was strong. For the Muslim women in this research the embodiment of an Islamic identity entailed more than the wearing of the hijab; it meant following Islamic guidelines, by constantly striving to live their lives in terms of beliefs, attitudes, behaviour and actions, as good Muslims. As they moved in a more religious direction, they expected more of themselves in terms of living Islamically. For some, this meant resolving dilemmas such as how to meet the sometimes diverging goals of their 'Muslim' and 'teacher' identities.

The reality of the teaching situation was differentially experienced. For example, for Rabiah, finding the balancing of both Muslim and teacher identities was less problematic than anticipated. When entering school she 'switched into teacher mode', focusing more closely on her Muslim identity in other contexts at home and with family. For Jamilah the dilemma of being a 'good Muslim teacher' contributed to her resignation. Conflicts of conscience and loyalty led her to decide that she no longer wanted to move down the path of assimilation. Whilst she enjoyed teaching she found the state system constraining and prescriptive in terms of what, how and when learning took place. She believed that the state system was not 'value-free' but that the values imbued were not Islamic. In fact, Jamilah believed that Islam was undermined by the state system and the National Curriculum was weakening the faith of Muslim children. She wanted to be proactive in her own community in order to halt

the trend of fading commitment to Islam. She left teaching feeling undervalued, unfulfilled, disillusioned and unwelcome. Similar concerns led, in part, to decisions by some respondents to enter supply or temporary teaching posts by choice, rather than full-time teaching, to gain some status and financial remuneration without total commitment to the state system. For others, like Asma, who followed, but did not choose, that avenue, supply teaching was a disadvantageous route, leading to feelings of inadequacies and stagnation in terms of professional development and professional confidence.

Prejudice, discrimination and identity stasis

There were many incidents of racial and religious prejudice targeted at the Muslim women in this research. It would be difficult to be precise about the motivation for the incidents but the evidence of experience by hijab-wearing women suggested that religious prejudice was more fervent than racial prejudice. The accounts of difficulties in gaining full-time posts in teaching for the hijab-wearing women provided additional evidence of struggle, all of which indicates that religious discrimination does exist in the education system. This is not to suggest that all school communities, senior managers, fellow teachers and pupils are Islamophobic, but that this is a reality and, currently, has the potential to curb the professional careers of some Muslim women who wish to enter the teaching profession.

Some Muslim women adopted 'identity stasis' to cope with subtle pressures on their 'Muslim identity' as teachers in the state education system (Menter, 1989). There were many examples of experiences when deliberate decisions not to voice opinions or enter conversations related to Islam, were taken. There was increasing pressure to 'keep quiet' in full-time teaching posts because of the long-term nature of their working-relations. Such pressures followed negative, fixed, stereotypical attitudes about Islam, from colleagues, mainly related to media portrayal of fundamentalist Islamic actions. In terms of social relations in the staffroom, it became easier to 'stay silent' than to contribute and risk confrontation. They would have welcomed reasoned, open-minded debate, but that was rare.

Being specialist teachers of religious education and of Islam led to another form of 'identity stasis' for some Muslim women in this research. Responses to their specialism were off-putting, including words like 'indoctrination' and obvious suspicions about their capa-

bility to be objective whilst so visibly embodying Islam. The outcome was a 'retreat' of the Muslim women to avoid confrontation: "You learn when to speak and when to be silent" (Rabiah). As Jamilah moved into her second year of teaching in a new school she made a deliberate decision to maintain 'main subject silence', preferring the anonymity of not contributing, to the possibility of confrontation and suspicion about her intentions when offering to help with the development of religious education. All these issues were making social relations with colleagues in schools difficult, with the Muslim women retreating from interactions, in order to leave their 'Muslim identity' intact.

Habitus

Social relations were more difficult for the Muslim women in the school situation than the relatively secure environment that had developed at the Higher Education institution during initial teacher training. The concept of 'habitus' (Elias, 1991; Bourdieu, 1984; Mennell, 1994; Mellor and Shilling, 1997) is helpful in understanding this. Habitus refers to the internalization of preferred ways of being, that are shared, at different levels of consciousness, with certain others, through social processes such as interaction, imitation and adaptation (Dunning, 1999). For Mennell (1994) identity is the more conscious level of habitus and the Muslim women's articulation of ways in which they perceived their relations with others offered many insights.

Differences in social habitus were identified by the teachers in their early careers, for example with the staffroom conversation difficulties already mentioned. Conversations about lifestyle choices, food, holidays, entertainment and relationships, were antithetical to their preferred lifestyle choices as Muslims. Where they were the only Asian, Muslim teacher in the school this could contribute to feelings of isolation and exclusion in the schools. Whilst Asian women were disproportionately represented in positions of classroom assistants and language support workers in their schools, and friendships sometimes flourished here, some Muslim teachers felt this further diminished their hard-earned 'teacher status' in the eyes of colleagues, pupils and pupils' parents.

Expressions like 'connecting', used by Jamilah, were particularly useful in describing how relationships were easier between people who shared more in their lives, past and present. She went on to

describe different levels of 'connectedness' explaining how, in her experience, a white Christian and Asian Muslim could share the experience of being 'outsiders'. Both were 'outsiders' in a predominantly secular society and, therefore, shared something at one level. On a deeper level, an Asian and an Asian Muslim would share lifestyle similarities and understandings but an Asian Muslim woman would connect at the deepest level with another Asian Muslim woman, because they shared most about each other's lives; they had most in-common.

Nawar expressed the same beliefs through different examples. The greatest 'relief' she experienced in her teaching was when she moved into the Muslim school and no longer had to justify herself, or to respond to questions about being Muslim; her colleagues and children in the Muslim school 'just knew'. Experiences in state schools during teaching practices had been difficult for Nawar because of lack of understanding and misinterpretation of her 'visible Muslim identity'. In her early career, Nawar was in a Muslim school in which she was comfortable as a practising Muslim. She enjoyed being able to offer a religious underpinning to her teaching, having time and facilities for prayer and shared social habitus with staff and pupils. However, at the end of this research, she was facing the dilemma of recognising her disadvantaged position as a teacher, financially, in terms of professional status, and long-term career prospects, if she stayed in the Muslim school. Despite her negative experiences in the state system during school experience in training she was considering moving back into that situation, if 'allowed', aware of the possible effects of her Muslim identity on her professional chances. She was in a double-bind situation.

Rabiah described similar experiences of feeling 'more comfortable' with others who had most in common in terms of life experiences. She talked about finding a sense of security in interactions with other Muslim women in which interpretations of words and actions could be made without risk of being misconstrued. This led to a discussion on my relationship as an 'outsider researcher' since, following such a premise, the understanding of a white, non-Muslim researcher investigating the experiences of 'black' and Asian Muslim women, would be limited. She explained that her involvement in the research was a means of trying to help me to understand what life is like for them, of trying to share understanding; she saw that we had those goals in common which helped.

Power differentials in the immediate school figuration influenced the professional development of the Muslim women in their early teaching careers. Positive interactions with pupils and parents did not match, in significance, interactions with 'more powerful' colleagues and senior managers. The evidence for this is seen in, for example, the decisions of the women to stay, leave or change their school environments, to seek a future in or out of the teaching profession in the state system. The women's self-appraisal of their professional development in these early stages of their career was dependent on relationships and levels of acceptance and support, as Muslim women teachers, from professional colleagues.

Summary

Through this chapter an attempt has been made to share understanding of experiences and perceptions of a group of Muslim women in their early teaching careers. Despite the small number of respondents and diversity of experiences, the evidence indicated that those women who were 'visibly Muslim', that is, they had adopted the hijab, had a more difficult time becoming established and accepted members of the teaching profession:

... people judge us as fundamentalists if we wear hijab ... I do find what I wear affects relationships with people. (Nawar)

Where the Muslim women met open views of Islam (Runnymede Trust, 1997) from other influential people in their teaching network the women could feel welcome and valued. Too frequently, suspicion of Islam, closed views of the religion and its effects on the lives of Muslim women, led to negative and isolating experiences for the women in this research. They found different ways of coping with this including colluding in their 'invisibility' through adopting the state of 'stasis' or retreat in relation to anything connected with Islam or their Muslim identity. There is much to be done inside the established state education system to eradicate prejudice and discrimination. If respect and valuing of cultural diversity is to become a reality for children (MacPherson, 1999) it must first become a reality amongst the professionals.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

MUSLIM WOMEN TEACHERS: LIFE HISTORIES, IDENTITIES AND CITIZENSHIP

Audrey Osler

Introduction

Muslim women in Western Europe have not only been subject to a narrow range of stereotypes but have also often been assumed to be a homogeneous group. Such stereotypes and assumptions may influence the perceptions of teachers and other professional groups working with Muslim women and girls and, indirectly, may also affect the quality of services which these women receive. The challenge is to find new ways of providing appropriate professional services which can be accessed by all on the basis of equality. This chapter presents a life history study of a sample group of Muslim women, all of whom were studying or teaching in the English West Midlands during the 1990s. At the time when the women participated in the study, each was either working as a teacher or was a graduate student following a course of professional training in preparation for teaching as a career. The life histories were collected as part of a broader study into the lives and careers of black and ethnic minority teachers in Britain (Osler, 1997b).

Here I explore how life histories of Muslim women teachers and students highlight issues of citizenship and identity. In doing so, I draw on the Runnymede Trust report, *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all* (Runnymede Trust, 1997). Before discussing some of the substantive issues arising from the study, I will consider some methodological issues and reflect on the contribution which life history research may make in challenging negative representations of Islam and of Muslims in Britain.

Life History Research

Life history research provides us with a means by which we can understand the complex experiences and perceptions of individuals and groups. Through a life history study we are able to collect detailed data from a range of individuals on a particular life experience, for example, their schooling. This, in turn, allows us to build up a picture of the complex and varied ways in which individuals perceive and interpret their schooling in the context of their broader life experiences. Thus, individual experiences of schooling can be set in broader social and historical contexts, allowing us to analyse schooling with reference to family life, later educational experiences and work or career. The life histories of Muslim women in Britain enrich the historical record by providing us with new primary source material on a group of women whose experiences have often gone unrecorded. Their analysis also allows us to review current understandings of the effectiveness of schooling and Higher Education and to reconsider our interpretations of relationships within society at large.

Large scale studies and reports have highlighted the disadvantage which certain minority ethnic groups experience in such areas as education, employment and housing (for example, Modood *et al.*, 1997). The danger is that, in reporting disadvantage and discrimination, we present a picture of structural and institutional racism which appears overwhelming and insurmountable. In effect, we may serve to disempower individuals and groups who are working to challenge inequality and injustice. The Lawrence inquiry report (Macpherson, 1999) highlighted institutional racism as a feature of modern British society. Its publication led senior politicians, including the Prime Minister and the then Home Secretary, to acknowledge institutional racism as a feature of our public services. One outcome is a Government statement outlining a programme of action to rid these services of structural disadvantage and discrimination (Home Office, 1999). Education is identified as a key area of action.

Life history can also play an important role in enabling us to understand discrimination and disadvantage in education and employment. It can provide us with information which may not only identify the barriers that individuals and groups may encounter but also highlight ways in which they have overcome disadvantage and discrimination to realise their rights as citizens. Life histories have the

potential to highlight the relationship between structure and agency and to enable us to understand them at an empirical level. First, they demonstrate how individuals encounter structural barriers presented by racist practices and provide us with evidence of the ways in which these barriers serve not only to restrict the opportunities of individuals, but also to prevent society from benefiting fully from their contributions. Secondly, life histories illustrate the ways in which individuals have effectively challenged such practices or found ways round them, providing valuable insights to others who may encounter similar barriers. Thus, life histories demonstrate individual agency and provide us with illustrations of ways in which those who experience disadvantage and racism can overcome these barriers, rather than be defeated by them.

Teachers' Lives and Careers

A number of studies have explored the life histories of teachers in Britain (Ball and Goodson, 1985; Sikes *et al.*, 1985; Nias, 1985; Ozga, 1988), Australia (Connell, 1985) and North America (Apple, 1986; Hargreaves, 1994). More recent studies have addressed the experiences of teachers in low-income countries (Davies, 1988; Harber and Dadey, 1993; Osler, 1997a; Shultz, 1994). While some studies have focused largely, or exclusively, on women, most have neglected the experiences of teachers from minority communities. Some notable recent exceptions include Casey's (1993) study of African American women teachers; Rakhit's (1998) account of South Asian women teachers in Britain, and, most recently, Gordon's (2000) study of African-American, Asian-American and Latino teachers in the United States.

This paper draws on the experiences of 13 Muslim women, both students and teachers. The data was collected as part of a life history study (Osler, 1997b), which drew on the narratives of some 70 black and ethnic minority students and teachers of both sexes, in Britain. The narratives were collected through a series of in-depth interviews. The study, as originally conceived, set out to investigate the experiences of a group of teachers whose experiences had, hitherto, been largely absent from the growing literature on teachers' lives and careers. It also focuses on a set of individuals who have largely succeeded in their education, and thus the study may be seen

to stand in contrast to much of the vast literature on 'race;' and education in Britain, in which the theme of 'underachievement' has been given great prominence. Similarly, it sought to extend the debates beyond the years of compulsory schooling, which have, until recently, been the primary focus of researchers working in this field.

One of the purposes of the study is to understand how individuals respond to institutionalised and structural racism in society and, in particular, to explore the strategies they adopt in order to 'manage' racism and overcome disadvantage. In other words, my aim is to better understand the relationship between structure and agency in these teachers' lives. I identify six broad orientations which black and ethnic minority teachers may adopt within their professional lives (*ibid.*). Each of these orientations largely depends on the individual's diagnosis and understanding of racism and discrimination, and each is characterised by a particular curriculum response, career focus and approach to students and to the community.

The study included individuals from a range of faith communities, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism, as well as others whose way of life was largely secular. When I began the study, in 1992, I expected religion to play an important part in shaping, defining and re-defining the identities of some individuals at particular points in their lives. I did not, however, anticipate the extent to which a number of individuals would draw on both religious tradition and, in some cases, personal beliefs and faith, to explain and support them in acquiring the skills and attitudes needed to achieve 'career success'. This was particularly true of certain individuals from both Muslim and Christian traditions.

It is impossible to do justice to the life history of one individual, let alone thirteen, in a short account such as this. The data on which I will draw is both rich and varied, and includes the stories of students in the process of making career decisions, and those training to teach, as well as practising teachers. However, in order to give a sense of the individual narratives on which I draw, I will first present three brief accounts drawn from the personal narratives of three teachers. The analysis which follows will largely be illustrated by references to the experiences of these three women, who were all practising teachers, but will also draw on data drawn from the wider sample, including the experiences of students in initial teacher training.

Three Case Studies

Each of the three women whose accounts are presented here were born and brought up in families where Islam was the household faith. Throughout this chapter I use the term Muslim as it is used in the Runnymede Trust report *Islamophobia* (1997), to include all those who define themselves as Muslims, or who were born into families where Islam is the household faith. As the report explains:

Such a definition does not assume that all Muslims are observant in their religious practice to the same extent or in the same ways. On the contrary, it acknowledges that Muslims vary in the ways they interpret and practise their faith and that Islam has non-observant adherents, as do other religions (ibid.:1).

So, for example, Salma, who is the subject of the first case study, describes her upbringing as ‘not very religious’, but has begun to practise her faith as an adult. The definition also allows us to recognise changing socio-cultural contexts. Yasmin, whose upbringing was in many ways similar to that of Salma, highlights the differences between her childhood in 1950s and 1960s Birmingham with that of the majority of her pupils, growing up in the 1990s in the same city, where there are more confident and assertive Muslim communities and where it is possible to attend a state school, where all the members of the class are from homes where Islam is practised.

Salma

Salma was 25 years old and in her first teaching post at an inner city primary school. Her parents had migrated from Pakistan, where her father had worked as a skilled carpenter. Salma, who was the eldest daughter in the family, was born in Birmingham and went to school there during the late 1970s and 1980s. She began her story by proudly declaring herself to be ‘a born and bred Brummie’. She recalled her own schooling with mixed feelings, attending one ‘middle class white primary school’ where she ‘didn’t belong’:

We moved house when I was about nine and it was quite a shock for me because we moved into a school where I was the only Asian and I was moved after a month because I couldn’t cope. . . . I have always been encouraged to work hard at school, because mum and dad both of them didn’t go to school much beyond the age of 10. But I just felt so out of place and so lonely.

Salma's parents continued to encourage her in her studies until she completed her compulsory schooling at the age of sixteen. Her parents then expected her to marry and put forward a number of possible partners. Salma, however, was determined to pursue her education and persuaded her father to allow her to study for her 'A' levels at a local sixth form college. From there she entered a local teacher training college. Salma is the first person in her family to have gone on to Higher Education. Her own education and career opportunities stand in contrast to those of her parents; neither of them was able to continue beyond primary school and her father was only able to find unskilled factory work in Britain.

Although Salma was allowed to pursue her studies, her parents continued to supervise her carefully, so that, throughout her sixth form studies and her first year of Higher Education her parents would drive her to college each morning and collect her each evening. It was not until the age of 19 that she was able to persuade them to allow her to move about freely without a chaperone and to use public transport.

Salma is, however, a fiercely independent and determined character. Immediately after graduating, she took a holiday in Pakistan. Having rejected the marriage plans her parents had made for her, Salma met in Pakistan the man she decided she wanted to marry. Her parents were unhappy about her choice as her prospective husband was less educated than she was. Unknown to her family, Salma and her fiancé approached the authorities and made arrangements for him to obtain a visa to come to Britain. Salma then returned home alone, and completed her first year as a teacher.

Salma's fiancé arrived at her parents' home a year later and her parents, recognising their daughter's determination, finally accepted her choice of partner. Salma's husband takes responsibility for the home and for housework, leaving her to pursue her career. Through marriage, Salma feels she has established her independence:

Now I work. I am the earner in my house. I am not my mother, and that is really important to me. I don't cook, I don't clean. I feel I have my independence and my own career and that is my priority for as long as I want it to be.

At school Salma is one of a number of black and ethnic minority teachers on the staff. She sees her African Caribbean headteacher as a professional role model:

He is confident, on top of it all, in charge, doing fine. I thought, if he can do it, I can do it. We immediately assumed this like experience, I don't know what you would call it, and I knew I would get the support that I needed to do well.

Nevertheless, in establishing herself in her first job, Salma has had to reflect on, and re-assess her identity. Although she dressed conservatively and always covered her head, she felt there was some suspicion of her by the Asian pupils' parents when she started work. She explained how, in the early days of her new job, she felt these parents did not trust her or recognise her as a qualified teacher:

They didn't trust me anyway. My Punjabi wasn't very good. They couldn't think I could be a good teacher if I was like them. I have had to actually learn it as well, so how could I teach it as much as some one who actually was it, that is, a white person.

Her husband helped her to improve her Punjabi and now she is confident to speak with the mothers of the children, although not the children themselves and not in front of white people. She feels she has grown more confident, not just as an individual, but in asserting aspects of her own identity. For example, she now sometimes chooses to wear Punjabi-style clothes to school, whereas, before, she would only wear them at home. She no longer covers her head. The strong theme running through Salma's story is that of choice. As a child and young adult she felt constricted by the choices of her parents. Gradually, she has been able to assert her own choices and grow more confident as she develops her own personal and professional identities. As an adult she has become more interested in her family's culture and language and has begun to practise her religious faith.

Yasmin

Yasmin was 37 years old and working for a multicultural support service in a middle management post at the time I interviewed her. Her father had been in the navy and her mother had been a midwife in Pakistan. They migrated to Britain in the early 1960s, when she was just four years old. The family settled in Birmingham, where her father found work in a local factory, and Yasmin was sent to the local Church of England primary school. As a child she also attended Sunday school and some services at the local parish church.

She recalled her early experiences of school in the mid 1960s when there were relatively few South Asian children in the city:

I was just one of those sweet angelic children. Reasonably attractive, fairly clean, bows in my hair and I remember to this day people calling me ‘honey-bunch’ and things like that, and not using my name. Partly, I thought, it’s a term of endearment and affection and that was quite nice from a teacher, but it did actually niggle me, even then. Why don’t you say my name?

Although Yasmin passed her 11 plus examination and went on to a girls’ grammar school where she particularly enjoyed studying the sciences, she feels that she was not able to realise her potential. She and her family lacked the relevant knowledge and advice:

I think I floundered because I wasn’t really part of the system and I don’t think my parents were *au fait* with the system, and they didn’t know how it worked and what was required. So I was always very average in terms of results. For instance, in the sixth form I only took 2 ‘A’ levels and nobody said to me, ‘Well, it is normal to take three, Yasmin’. I hadn’t done physics ‘O’ level but instead of saying, ‘Well, you ought to take something’ they just left me. They weren’t particularly interested I don’t think. And that sort of advice wasn’t there. Everybody had a standard route. You took three ‘A’ levels and you went on to university and there was hardly any deviation from that, but nobody told me that.

Yasmin took up a place at a local teacher training college. At a time when the BEd degree was being introduced and teaching was developing as an all graduate profession, Yasmin qualified as a secondary science teacher with a certificate. It was a time of teacher shortages and no one suggested that she completed a fourth year to gain a degree. She struggled during the first few months of teaching and so gave it up and went into the civil service. After a few years she returned to teaching, since she found her administrative job undemanding.

Her first job was in a Catholic school—‘I was taken on there on the basis that although I wasn’t a Catholic, being a Muslim was better than being nothing at all’. She was re-deployed from there and later re-deployed from another school, and feels that in the early years of teaching she was given little, if any, support or professional development. Yasmin reflects on her developing political awareness:

I didn’t want to have a chip on my shoulder. I personally wasn’t on the receiving end of overt racism but I am now sure I was on the receiving end of a lot of prejudice and covert deep-seated prejudice.

Structures (which) I am sure contributed to my being in certain situations over and over again. Re-deployment and only temporary posts, and not knowing the system and not knowing I had rights, and not knowing—hang on—this wasn't happening to everybody. Well, it wasn't only happening to me, but people like me. . . . I think I was beginning to be aware of it, but I still hadn't understood it that being black actually meant something in political terms. It wasn't just being black and you had a different culture and a different religion—being black in this society meant that certain things worked against you.

She eventually found a permanent post in a school where she remained for a number of years. Yasmin recalls how she was left to herself to manage discipline, and indeed, racial abuse:

There was one incident where some child did actually shout: 'You black bitch!' and walked out of the classroom. And it was treated as (and I accepted it at the time) as a personal conflict, a personality clash, between them and me. It was never treated as something which the school had to deal with as a racist incident. And I accepted that.

Yasmin eventually took a career break and travelled abroad before returning to work as a supply teacher, filling a vacant science post on a temporary basis. She was invited to work at the school on a permanent basis as a teacher of English as a second language, a task for which she was unqualified, yet she was not offered the science post for which she was qualified:

They couldn't see that I was a science teacher and that really brought it home to me. You only see a black woman, you don't see a science teacher, you only see a woman and most E2L people are women, and you see me as a black person who might be useful in this field, but who couldn't possibly have anything else to offer. So I thought I would go out there and use the system, which I did. I thought, well if that is how you see me I will go and see what it has to offer. I will look into this. There were several jobs about and I actually applied for a job in a multicultural support service in another Authority.

At the time we spoke Yasmin had finally managed to achieve promotion by working for a multicultural support service, in other words, by exploiting her experience and aspects of her own cultural identity, rather than by using her formal qualifications. Nevertheless, she recognised the importance of formal qualifications and was studying for a Master's degree in Education. As she pointed out, the test would really come as to whether she could achieve career progression commensurate with her qualifications and experience if, and when, she tried to move back into a mainstream position.

Yasmin's story is one where she appears to be always at the margins and where it is difficult for others to accept her for who she is, and to acknowledge her professional expertise. Her account of her career reads as a story of her developing politicisation.

Neelum

At the time when Neelum told me her story, she was working in a primary school as a Section 11 teacher, and she had chosen to work on a part-time basis, as she had a young family. She held a promoted post, which was relatively unusual for a part-timer. I have recounted Neelum's story in some detail elsewhere (Osler, 1997b: 73–79) and so here I will simply emphasise some key points which relate most closely to questions of identity and citizenship.

Neelum had a keen sense from the earliest days of her career of the need for greater racial justice in education. She was born and grew up in a small town in Scotland, to which her parents had migrated from Pakistan in the early 1950s. She attended teacher training college in Glasgow and took on her first teaching post in a secondary school in inner city Glasgow. When she moved to the English West Midlands she was acutely aware of the low expectations held of black students in the secondary school where she was employed. As a consequence she decided to transfer to primary education.

Neelum's story involves her creating career and professional development opportunities for herself. For example, she studied part-time for a Master's degree and became involved in providing in-service training for other teachers. She recounts how, as a Section 11 support teacher, and as an Asian woman, she has to work hard to demonstrate that she is 'better than' her white colleagues, in order to be equally respected by them and by the children she teaches.

Neelum saw herself as disadvantaged as a black woman in teaching and was also aware of anti-Muslim feeling. Rather than be discouraged by this, it made her all the more determined to do her job well, to succeed, and to demonstrate to those who put barriers in her way that she would overcome those barriers. She described how a young Muslim boy had approached her and asked her if Muslims could be teachers:

Just the other day, this little fellow stopped me, and he wasn't that little, he might have been about 8 or 9 and he just stopped me and asked me, just dying to ask these questions. (He) said 'Are you a

Muslim?’ and I said ‘Yes’. ‘Are you a teacher?’ and I said ‘Yes’. ‘I didn’t know they allowed Muslims to be teachers’... He was really baffled with the answers because I said, ‘Yes, you can. You carry on doing well in your class and you carry on learning all of the things that you have to learn and you could be like me’.

Neelum felt that Muslim parents, in particular, had offered her much of her daily support in teaching. She felt her cultural background, her linguistic skills and her understanding of Muslim children’s needs were much appreciated by parents:

For parents to see that a school is actually employing Muslim teachers, when a school actually does it, that must obviously boost them. I may not know the child but immediately there is a rapport there. They come and ask your advice or talk to you about their child, and ask you about yourself and what you are doing there. So immediately there is that point of contact because of the same colour, the same culture and perhaps the same religion. They don’t dilly-dally with the formalities, they just start. That’s really nice, it really boosts your confidence a lot, and your value, and that value boosting can come quite often more from the parents than from the staff. It gives you your credibility.

From quite an early stage in her career Neelum developed an understanding of structural disadvantage and discrimination. A strong conviction that all children should have access to a full range of educational opportunities led her to develop skills which would support bilingual learners. Her work brought her into contact with other black teachers and so her professional commitment to equality developed into a broader political understanding as she discovered other teachers who had encountered similar career barriers to the ones she herself faced. Her account acknowledges the complex ways in which discrimination operates, the interaction of racism and sexism, and the ways in which discrimination may have cultural and religious dimensions.

Islamophobia, Citizenship and Identity

The accounts of each of the three teachers, Salma, Yasmin and Neelum, highlight a number of issues relating to discrimination, to citizenship, and to personal and professional identities. Islamophobia has been defined as ‘unfounded hostility to Muslims’, the consequences of such hostility, and the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream

social and political affairs (Runnymede Trust, 1997:4). Figure 1 identifies eight key features of Islamophobia, in the form of closed views of Islam, and contrasts each with an alternative, open perspective. The open perspectives are founded on respect and appreciation of Islam, but, nevertheless, permit legitimate dialogue, criticism and disagreement.

Table 1: Closed and open views of Islam (from Runnymede Trust, 1997)

Distinctions	Closed views	Open views
1. monolithic/ diverse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – single monolithic bloc – static – unresponsive to new realities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – diverse and progressive – internal differences, debates and developments
2. separate/ interacting	separate and other: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – not having aims in common with other cultures – not affected by other cultures – not influencing other cultures 	interdependent with other cultures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – having shared aims/values – affected by other cultures – enriching other cultures
3. inferior/ different	Islam inferior <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – barbaric, irrational – primitive, sexist 	Islam different but not deficient <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – equally worthy of respect
4. enemy/partner	Islam seen as violent/aggressive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – clash of civilisations – Muslims supportive of terrorism 	Islam an actual/potential partner in co-operative enterprises <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – shared solutions sought for shared problems
5. manipulative/ sincere	Muslims seen as manipulative Islam a political ideology	Muslims seen as sincere Islam a genuine religious faith
6. criticism of west rejected/ considered	Muslim criticisms of ‘the West’ rejected	Muslim criticisms of ‘the West’/other cultures considered and debated
7. discrimination defended/ criticised	hostility towards Islam used to justify discrimination towards Muslims/ their social exclusion	debates and disagreements with Islam do not diminish efforts to combat discrimination/exclusion
8. Islamophobia seen as natural/ problematic	anti-Muslim hostility accepted as normal/natural	critical views of Islam are themselves subject to critique <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – inaccurate views challenged

I will review the life histories of the Muslim women teachers and student teachers, both to consider ways in which they illustrate examples of Islamophobia, and to identify ways in which they challenge Islamophobic images and messages which are commonly found in the media. In particular, I wish to consider the impact of these messages on Muslim women, and, especially, Muslim women teachers, in the ways they are able to access services, and pursue their education and careers. I will focus on the following four questions, drawn from Table 1.

1. Is Islam portrayed as monolithic and static, or as diverse and dynamic?
2. Is Islam portrayed as 'other' and separate, or as similar and inter-dependent?
3. Is discriminatory behaviour against Muslims defended or opposed?
4. Is anti-Muslim discourse seen as natural or problematic?

Islam: monolithic and static, or diverse and dynamic?

As I have argued above, life histories have the potential to present diversity and difference among people whose broad cultural backgrounds are very similar. Each of the three stories told above is of a woman born into a family where Islam was the household religion. In all three cases the parents had migrated from Pakistan. Yet, the parents adopted very different approaches to their daughter's upbringing. Yasmin, growing up in Birmingham in the 1960s, was sent to a Church school and Sunday school, and mixed with white children as well as the children of her parents' Pakistani friends. Salma, who attended multicultural schools in the same city a decade or so later, was discouraged from mixing with other children and found that she 'couldn't cope' when she transferred to a school with a white middle-class intake. Both women describe their families as 'not very religious' but one chooses to practise her religion as an adult, while the other leads a secular lifestyle.

Perhaps the most important feature of the study, in contributing to a diverse and dynamic portrait of Islam, is to present women's experiences, and to demonstrate variety between individuals and between different generations. The *Islamophobia* report (Runnymede Trust, 1997), acknowledges the importance of differences in the experiences of Muslim women and men, as an aspect of diversity, but,

unfortunately, does not illustrate or develop this point. This would seem a serious oversight in a context such as Britain, where one feature of Islamophobia is a representation of Islam as a sexist religion, and where men are more likely to be found acting as spokespeople for Muslim communities.

Islam: 'other' and separate, or similar and interdependent?

Each account reveals that identity is both complex and changing. All three choose to describe themselves as Muslims, yet the emphasis they give to this aspect of themselves varies. Neelum and Yasmin, regularly, also describe themselves as black, and Salma acknowledges the 'like experience' she has with her African Caribbean headteacher. Yasmin also notes how a Catholic school chose to employ her as a member of another faith community, rather than engage a teacher who lacked any religious background, although her account seems to suggest that she was not necessarily accepted on the basis of equality.

While both Neelum and Salma explore the common ground they share with Muslim parents, Yasmin, by contrast, emphasises the differences between her own upbringing and schooling in 1960s Birmingham with that of her Muslim pupils growing up in the 1990s. She reminds us that 'like experience' may sometimes be wrongly assumed by on-lookers. Nevertheless, it is clear that the broad goals of social and racial justice, which run through these accounts and through those of the Muslim student teachers, reflect common shared values with other, non-Muslim, teachers in the original study (Osler, 1997b).

Is discriminatory behaviour against Muslims defended or opposed?

This is, perhaps, one of the most difficult questions to respond to from the evidence provided in the accounts above. Yasmin, who followed a traditional academic path and attended a grammar school, was clearly not encouraged to follow the 'standard route' and teachers did not encourage her to apply to university. This may be explained in terms of teacher assumptions about the opportunities and choices open to South Asian children, and, in particular, girls, and the negative stereotyping of these pupils which was common in the 1970s and 1980s (see, for example, Shepherd, 1987; Wright, 1992; Troyna and Siraj-Blatchford, 1993). The disadvantage that Yasmin faced was, at best, accepted, if not defended, by her teachers. She also recalls that the racial harassment she encountered as

a teacher was explained in terms of a personality clash and that she herself did not, at the time, expect any redress.

Within the broader sample of narratives are accounts by student teachers of explicit anti-Muslim prejudice by teachers at their teaching practice schools. One young woman experienced hostility to her religion in the form of derogatory remarks. In particular, she was criticised, during Ramadan, when she was fasting, for choosing to spend the lunch break in her classroom rather than in the staff room where other teachers were eating. The teachers' criticisms were upheld by her university tutor who advised her she needed to make more effort to 'fit in' (Osler, 1997b). This is an example of discriminatory behaviour against a young Muslim woman which was not only defended, but was allowed to become institutionalised, as the student teacher's successful completion of her teaching practice was dependent on the judgements of the hostile teacher.

Is anti-Muslim discourse seen as natural or problematic?

The Runnymede Trust (1997) draws our attention to the ways in which anti-Muslim discourse, or Islamophobia, is increasingly seen as respectable. The report provides examples of how hostility towards Islam, and towards Muslim communities, is accepted as natural and normal, even among those who would condemn, and actively challenge, other forms of racism within society. It would seem that this phenomenon is closely linked to media portrayals of Islam as barbaric, irrational, primitive and sexist (see Figure 1, point 3). Wieviorka (1998) suggests that racism is underpinned by understandings of, and attitudes towards, modernity. He identifies one key site of racism as that where identity is seen to be in tension with modernity. Social tensions may occur when collective feelings about individual identity conflict with a politically and economically driven agenda of modernity. While ethnic consciousness does not, necessarily, lead to conflict, nevertheless, conflicts within society, and competition for jobs or other resources, may do much to increase ethnic consciousness (Banton, 1997). Certain groups may be stigmatised as not accepting the world of modernity. So, we find that Muslims in Western Europe are frequently associated, for instance, in the media, with 'traditions' portrayed as disadvantaging women (while at the same time the rest of society is assumed to have moved beyond such a patriarchal and oppressive attitude to women). Similarly, British Muslims may be

associated with repressive and reactionary movements elsewhere in the world.

Such perceptions undermine both the identities and citizenship rights of all Muslims and, I would suggest, particularly Muslim women, since their voices are even less likely to find public expression than those of men. Citizenship may be seen in two broad ways: first, it includes the opportunity to participate fully and freely in the economic, social and public life of the local community and the nation. It is, therefore, much more than simple legal status. Secondly, it also encompasses feelings; it requires a sense of belonging. Anti-Muslim discourses, which have become an accepted part of 'common-sense' thinking, serve to exclude Muslims and effectively restrict their citizenship rights. Muslim women who, within Islamophobic discourses are portrayed as passive and oppressed, find their citizenship rights further undermined. Citizenship is closely linked to the concept of identity. The narratives presented above illustrate how Muslim women, like all of us, have multiple identities. They may choose to emphasise particular aspects of their identities in particular contexts, but anti-Muslim discourse serves to deny them this freedom.

Neelum's example of the Muslim child who questions whether Muslims are 'allowed' to be teachers is particularly disturbing, since it suggests that he has absorbed much of the anti-Muslim discourse around him, and assumed that society has somehow institutionalised the exclusion of Muslims. It might be argued that this is a child's confusion, or that, since the child has never come across any Muslim teachers, he has erroneously drawn this conclusion. However, the narratives of student teachers include an example of teachers who believe that Muslims should not be allowed to become teachers and, particularly, not teachers of religious education.

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 have brought the concerns of this chapter into sharper focus. The repercussions are not only felt at national and international levels but also within local communities across the world. In Britain, the USA, and in other parts of the world many Muslims, particularly women, have been subjected to abuse and harassment (Amnesty International, 2001; *The Independent*, 4 January 2002, p. 30). As one group of US educators reminds us:

In times of crisis human rights are often called into question, yet if humanity is to advance, these rights and standards must not be set

aside, but rather reinforced. Human rights must not be placed on a subordinate plane to political objectives. We must reassert the validity of these rights, and work to ensure that human rights do not become a footnote in the debate over what will and has to be done. They must form the foundation of not only our personal lives, but also the life of our community and our world. We cannot be selective, not with specific rights nor with specific people, nor with specific countries. Human rights are for ALL people, and by their very nature are indivisible (Amnesty International, 2001, my emphasis).

If we are to ensure that 'human rights do not become a footnote in the debate over what will and has to be done' then we need to ensure that our schools, colleges and universities provide an education in human rights, in line with the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We need to ensure that young people are educated as cosmopolitan citizens, showing solidarity and respect for difference within communities and states, as well as at a global level (Osler and Vincent, 2002). As this chapter has sought to illustrate, story telling and the collection of life histories have a key role to play in enabling young people and adults to understand and respect diversity and to break down stereotypes. As Beck (2001) argues, in an article written in response to the attacks of 11 September:

What are we fighting for when we fight against global terrorism? My answer is that we should fight for the right to be cosmopolitan, which is fundamentally based on the recognition of the otherness of others.

Summary

A focus on the Muslim women in this study challenges some of the common stereotypes held about Muslim women in Britain. It reveals a complex picture of these women's education, careers, contributions and identities, and demonstrates how they are working to challenge racism, Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination and exclusion. It also shows how Islamophobia, as experienced by British Muslim women teachers, may be interwoven and linked to other exclusionary forces. It poses a number of challenges in realising a society in which Muslim women can claim their citizenship rights on the basis of equality. While education has been identified as a key site through which racism in society can be challenged, much remains to be done in dismantling the Islamophobic discourses in

society and among teachers and other education professionals. There is a pressing need to educate for cosmopolitan citizenship and human rights. The study suggests that efforts to combat Islamophobia will require further dialogue and co-operation between Muslims and non-Muslims. Particular attention needs to be given both to the ways in which Muslim women may experience discrimination and exclusion within our society, and to the strategies which they have found effective in challenging such discrimination.

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CONCLUSION

THE WAY FORWARD

Tansin Benn and Haifaa Jawad

There has never been a more important time to listen to the experiences of Muslim women living in the west. Research throughout the book has indicated that the visibility of religious identity for some Muslim women has significantly affected their life-chances. Stereotypical attitudes about their lives and life-styles influence interaction and opportunities in the wider social context. Data has indicated that Muslim women face barriers based on misunderstandings of the values, beliefs and practices of Muslims. Whilst not homogeneous, there were similarities in experiences which suggest it has been worthwhile collating the diverse contributions to produce this book.

One of the intentions shared by several authors was to highlight the views of Muslim women, making their reality central to the research. In addition, chapters have explored how Muslim women are portrayed and stereotypes perpetuated in various domains. The personal accounts that permeate the book bring the everyday experiences alive for the reader. The thrust of the book lies in the synthesis of material focusing on a traditionally marginalised group who are struggling for acceptance in predominantly non-Muslim societies.

As editors, we offer concluding recommendations to help address the problem of social marginalisation and, thereby, improve integration. Most importantly, there needs to be greater dialogue inclusive of the voices of Muslim women. For example, there should be more opportunities for separate and integrated conferences and forums, in academic and educational environments, which welcome the views and opinions of Muslim women. Currently, from the Muslim community it is predominantly the voices of men that find public expression and influence through literature and media, shaping the lives of women. Redressing the imbalance between Muslim men and women in powerful contexts is essential to enable the views and aspirations of Muslim women to be heard and incorporated in key decision-making processes. In addition, there needs to be greater solidarity

between non-Muslims and Muslims, for example, as represented by the researchers who contributed to this book, to improve the position of Muslim women in the west. Cultural events and awareness programmes can be a means of introducing and exchanging religious understanding. There is much common ground between the experiences of women, regardless of faith or other attempts to categorize difference. There needs to be more understanding of the position of Muslim women, who often have to overcome problems within their own communities, as well as in society beyond. Increased awareness of their aspirations and preferences will enhance relations within and between groups.

The September 11th 2001 atrocities have been a catalyst for change. Despite the early horrors and inevitable backlash across the world, particularly in the west, indicators are beginning to show that there is hope for increasing harmony and understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims. This has been helped in Britain and America, for example, by the solidarity shown between politicians, journalists, religious and community leaders to condemn the acts of terrorism and distance Islam from the devastation. Such consensus was successful in calming and containing public anger and aggression initially directed at Muslim people. An example of British solidarity is evident in the following statement by leading politicians at the start of an Islamic Awareness Week (IAW):

British people of all faiths—and of none—reacted with horror to the events of 11th September. The unity with which all communities in Britain responded shows we have strength in our diversity.

(‘The Muslim News’, 21st December 2001,10)

More resources have followed to assist community and religious relations. For example, in Britain all political parties have agreed to extra financial and other resources for protecting and increasing inter-faith understanding. A significant gesture was the unanimous sympathy shown by the British Muslim community for the victims of September 11th, which encouraged mutual empathy and understanding. (British Muslims Monthly Survey, Vol. 9:10, 1, October 2001).

It is still too early to be able to forecast the major changes brought about by September 11th 2001, but we must not underestimate the tensions that still exist and need resolving. The momentum for policy development, strategy and action, needs to be maintained. Muslims, who were already targets for religious hatred, did become more vulnerable

and uncertainties continue in the context of international tensions. The ongoing 'war against terrorism' is still very high in the consciousness of many in the west. The research suggests that visible, differentiating, religious symbols, such as the hijab, are the mediums that instigate much religious hatred, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments.

It is our hope that this book will contribute to sharing knowledge and understanding of Muslim women's life-experiences in a range of diverse situations in the west. It is a contribution towards enhancing the position of Muslim women, in particular, and to the improvement of Muslim/non-Muslim relations more generally.

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