

Feminisms, Islamophobia and Identities

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There has been a tendency of late to conflate all Muslims as belonging to a single nation and aspiring to a single political aim. This effect has been achieved by some authors so as to accommodate Islamophobia, but by others to generate a sense of inclusive unity that encloses all Muslims. We contend that in the post 9/11 climate of Islamophobia women wearing the scarf, the mohajabehs, are making a political choice. They are publicly branding themselves as Muslims at a time when such a label carries the potential fear of making them vulnerable to open hostility. But the Islam that they embody is distinct and different from the stark, gendered divides envisaged by protagonists on both side of the Islamophobic divide. The unity demanded by some of the highly vocal and visible Islamic groups marginalises the contestations posed within these groups by women who may be described as feminists. The specificities demanded by those who envisage Islam primarily as an antagonistic political force in the UK are very different from the flexibility that many women envisage. They aspire to belong to the *Umma* or people of Islam, conceptualised as crossing ethnic, racial, geographical and political boundaries, an identity that is primarily inclusive rather than exclusive. The multiplicities of identities of many mohajabehs sit more easily within the permeable unbounded *umma* than the constrained gendered boundaries of the combative male political Islamism.

Islam as a faith and Muslims as a whole have found themselves under something of a siege in a current climate of Islamophobia (Allen and Nielsen, 2002; Cummins, 2004a). In the battle of 'Jihad versus McWorld' (Barber, 1995), many ordinary Muslims have found themselves on the wrong side. They stand accused of being 'a threat' to the West (Buruman and Margalit, 2004) and its national security and insufficiently committed to the politics and values of their host communities. Islamophobia creates a wide gap between the Muslims' perception of who they are and the ways in which they are viewed by the host society. Groups on both sides of the divide demand that Muslims abandon either their faith or their national allegiance. The *Hizb ut-Tahrir* announces that it is no longer possible for the youth in the UK to be both British and Muslim and declare that it is necessary to 'choose' between faith and nationality (*Sunday*, BBC4, 24 August 2003).¹ Islamist groups such as the *Al Muhajerin* announce on their posters 'you are either with the Muslims or with the Kaafir' (*Guardian*, 9 September 2004) or parade their 'choice' in London by calling a conference on the 11 September 2003 to glorify the suicide bombers, calling them the 'magnificent 11'.² These aggressive political positions may be described as part of a concerted effort by revivalists in Britain to create a

masculine, combative Islamic political identity that seeks to unite the Muslim community in opposition to the rising Islamophobia in the host society.³ Their high-profile propagandist moves are countered by equally abrasive declarations made by parties such as the United Kingdom Independent party (UKIP) and politicians such as Robert Kilroy-Silk, who denounce the entire community of Muslims the world over as failing in every way, or writers such as Will Cummins who attack 'the black heart of Islam' and state categorically that 'All Muslims, like all dogs, share certain characteristics' (Cummins, 2004a).⁴ Politically, Cummins claims, Muslim voters have a 'global jihadi agenda'. He compares voters in Leicester and Birmingham to the Janjaweed militia who have committed atrocities in the Darfur region of Sudan and claims that Islam is 'sanctified by the principle ... that any civilisation, however repulsive, has the same value as any other' (Cummins, 2004b).

The abuse by the media and politicians is backed by 'scholarly' works by authors such as Huntington who claim to have come to the considered opinion that there has, of necessity, to be a clash of civilisations between the West and the rest (Huntington, 1997). Even elected representatives of constituencies with large Muslim communities such as the Leicester MP and Foreign Office Minister Denis MacShane declare that it is 'time for the elected and community leaders of British Muslims to make a choice' between being British or Muslim (*Guardian*, 2003).

The fears engendered by Islamophobia lead to political backlash on both sides and can play into the politics of groups such as the far-right British National Party (BNP) who capitalise on fear of the other. At the same time restrictive policies that specifically target Muslims are fuelled by measures such as the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 that has led to wholesale arrests of rafts of Muslims. Many have been released, but some still remain in prison without access to lawyers or entitlement to due process. The assumption that it was 'Muslims' specifically who have been the target of regressive measures in the West was intensified in February 2004 when the French government decided to ban the head scarf from schools and bar access to education to anyone wearing a religious insignia. The combination of these measures locates Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular as sometimes-unwilling emblems of combative Islam in the cross fire between faith and state policies.

This paper seeks to consider what this crisis has meant in terms of the life experiences of Muslim women in West Yorkshire and the strategies that they have forged to deal with these problems. It will reflect the views of Muslim women of different generations on Islam and politics, and the different parameters they have selected for defining their lived experiences and their own definitions of their identities, nationalities and allegiances.

The *Umma*

The call for supranationality made by *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and others is rooted in the historical claim that Muslims belong to the single community of the *umma* that, according to the teachings of the Prophet, recognises no divisions by race, class or nationality. However from the very inception of the faith the *umma* has been, and

remains, more of an ideal than a reality. It has been a concept that facilitated participation without imposing debilitating practical constraints. The millennial empire of Islam did not demand its people to make a choice between their nationality and faith; indeed it accommodated a vast diversity of faiths and nations under its *melliat* governance that allowed for peaceful co-existence and mutual respect between people of different colours and creeds. The *melliat* system recognised and respected the different faiths and group identities and accommodated their needs. History denounces statements such as those made by *Hizb ut-Tahrir* that it is not possible for Muslims to be both British and Muslims and by the *Muhajerun* that the teaching of Islam condone acts of carnage and violence. These are specifically male interpretations made by men and for men in a specific time and place: in the aftermath of 9/11 in the West. They are declarations that seek to secure the cohesion of the Islamic brotherhood and its solidarity in face of adversity. But they represent the views of small minorities on the margin: Qaiser M Talib writing in *Q-News*, which describes itself as 'the magazine for the global Muslim', argues that giving air and print space to 'this country's extremist groups are in reality an Islamophobic journalist's dream' and '[t]hose who wish to damage the image of Islam in the West instead choose to interview those who they know will spout hogwash' (Qaiser, 2003, p. 17). They orchestrate these views and the responses, which include the demonisation of Muslims by some politicians and newspapers in Britain and the US, spurring on the galloping progress of Islamophobia. There is also a fear on the part of Muslims of the spread of a new violent form of imperialism illustrated by the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the threats against Iran and Syria.

The calls for fraternity of the *umma* are specifically constructed as a reaction to a crisis. They are primarily addressed to young men, and recall the ideal state where Muslims had a single overriding political identity: one that extended beyond mere borders, nationalities and party political allegiances. At the same time, with the emergence of the scarf debacle, the *umma* is seen as requiring the explicit and public support of its women who are expected to endorse the 'traditional' gender hierarchies that many Muslim women may no longer wish to accept (Buijs, 1996; Moghissi, 1999). There is a simplistic assumption that Muslim women as a whole and those who wear the *hijab*: the *mohajebah*, in particular do so not only as a matter of faith, but also as a political endorsement of the specific Islamist political views (Hamzeh, 2000; Ismail, 2003). This is not the case.

The call for British Muslims to discard their nationality in favour of their faith is unifying and empowering for a group that has been marginalised and labelled as 'terrorists' by the media and too often by neighbours and acquaintances as well. However men and women are likely to respond differently to the call for unity, not only because by and large terrorism is imagined to be the domain of men, but also because there is a gendered perception of Islam and *umma*. It is the contention of this paper that the demands of politicised radical Islam, in terms of the prescriptions that it makes, are understood differently by Muslim women, including the *mohajabehs*. As Muslims, women from ethnic minorities, particularly the *mohajebah*, may have more in common with their 'white' British-Muslim sisters than their male cradle-Muslim brethren. Thus though there is a shared experience of

Islamophobia, for Muslim women the *umma* means that this experience is not bounded by race and ethnicity. The *umma* subsumes, without excluding, their race, ethnicity and nationalities. Nor is it impermeable to feminists' demands for active political participation at all levels. For Muslim converts the decision to wear the *hijab* in the West is a public political assertion of the right to belong to the community of Muslims, but, particularly for convert women, it is not a rejection of home and hearth and kinship relations with their non-Muslim families and parents. Within liberal democratic states and feminist contexts their decision to wear the *hijab* is a matter of faith and identity and a political act of solidarity, but not one that delineates separation from their kin and communities.

Methods

This paper is based on a series of interviews in three generational studies (Afshar, 1989a, 1989b, 1994) and research conducted by Franks with 'white' converts as well as cradle Muslim women who had taken the revivalist path (2001, 2004) and interviews with Muslim women in their third age in West Yorkshire (Afshar, Franks, Maynard and Wray, 2001). Afshar had used the snowball method to meet with her respondents whom she initially interviewed in the 1980s. She has retained informal links with six of the younger generation of 'migrant' Muslim women in West Yorkshire particularly those who in the late 1980s and early 1990s were choosing to don the *hijab* and identify themselves as 'Muslims' (Afshar, 1989a, 1989b, 1994). Over the years they have had sporadic conversations, phone calls and discussions with occasional meetings at funerals, weddings and festive occasions. Contacts were more frequent and intense at times of crisis and more dormant at other times. Since the mid-90s younger siblings and friends as well as 'white' converts have joined this informal circle. They have agreed to read drafts of this paper and comment on it before publication. The discussions with the older generation were organised and carried out by Afshar, Franks, Maynard and Wray (2001) as part of a ESRC funded comparative study of empowerment and disempowerment for British women in their third age. For this study Franks and Wray conducted focus groups and with Afshar used a semi-structured questionnaire format for the interviews. The women were between the ages of 58 and 85 years and in the case of South Asian women they often had to use interpreters.

The paper also draws on a series of interviews conducted in 2003 with Muslims of Pakistani origins in West Yorkshire as the British part of a Toronto based international study of Muslim Diaspora. For this project, the interviewers used questionnaires and some asked the questions in Punjabi. Many of the interviewees who were first generation rural migrants were not able to read English. All the interviewers lived in the inner city. Four were Punjabi and Urdu speaking as well as two white English only speakers – one male community worker and Franks, a white female researcher. The English speakers were able to interview colleagues and young participants who had been brought up in Britain. Although data collectors networked through their own communities and contacts, the fact that there were four collectors from the Pakistani communities from different backgrounds (who did not know each other) meant that this was not a snowballed sample in

the usual sense. There are limitations to snowballing in that the sampling frame is often constructed of a particular friendship network (Rutter, 2003). All the collectors of data did so through networking in the everyday world: for example when working and when visiting. One of the interviewers found that she could involve women from her community, when paying respects to the dead at the *Janazah*. She said 'you sit there for a few hours and get talking'.

Identities

Hizb ut-Tahrir's call can be seen as a move towards the ethnicisation of political Islam, as it claims Muslims form a discrete cultural group. This claim is based on emphasising processes of cultural distinction and the construction of boundaries between those who belong and those who do not. The construction of boundaries through the emphasising of particular cultural differences, while other differences and similarities are downplayed, is central to the creation and maintenance of ethnic groups (Barth, 1969; Vermeulen and Govers, 1994). As such it may be drawing ethnic boundaries that focus on the situational character of identity and the definition of identities at the boundaries (Barth, 1969; Vermeulen and Govers, 1994). But political identity is not easily reduced to such boundaries (Cohen, 2000a). The emphasis placed in a boundary approach to ethnicity on claimed cultural groups and the definition of identity at the boundaries in interactions with others make it rather inadequate for understanding the perceptions of their own identities by many Muslim women in Britain (Narayan, 2000, pp. 1083–5). They do not necessarily define themselves in terms of their nationality/ies or ethnicity (Schmidt, 2002). But the self-ascribed identity that they chose to construct within the constraints of their social/political/personal circumstances (Ghorashi, 2003; Vermeulen and Govers, 1994, p. 1) may be anchored in their faith; a definition that crosses traditional divides both personally and politically. It often is constructed through their lived experiences and encounters with the host society and its agencies. It is difficult if not impossible to constrain women to the narrow prescriptive of a culturally constructed political divide that groups such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* wish to impose on them.

The multiplicity, fluidity, contextualised and contested qualities of identities that studies of gender have highlighted have undermined any notion of a single all embracing primary identity to which all others must be subordinated at all times and at all costs (Eley and Suny, 1996, p. 10). Women often have more fluid identities than men; they are usually named after their fathers, and subsequently their husbands and known as mothers of their children. In addition to the nomenclature, life processes mark women physically and psychologically. Physical alterations and developments mark women's bodies and psychological changes affect them all be they celibate, married, mothers or not. Mothers experience additional physical and emotional changes, which accompany the move from being an individual to being another person's mother and perhaps being known by another person's name as his wife.

Over time the markers of identity change quite dramatically for women. More so for the migrant women who experience the additional complexity of changing nationality. They have moved across geographical and national boundaries to a

land where, on arrival, they became 'different' and an 'ethnic minority'. Nothing in their earlier lives had prepared them for the experience of racism that many encountered as a result. The move has made much of the knowledge they had acquired up to then meaningless. Their language, their faith, their traditions and rituals all cease to be the 'norm'. Many have moved from warm open spaces into small cold surroundings where they have almost no skill and know how in dealing with the most basic requirements of everyday life. As Mrs A told Afshar in 1988:

You get closed in the *chardivari* (four walls). I was ashamed to go out, I didn't know anybody. Not like home with your auntie living next door ... and then everything was different. How could you do your cooking or washing when there is nowhere to hang out clothes to dry or spread fruit and pulses to dry? It was cold and damp and I was really scared.

Mrs B who had moved to the UK in 1968 told Afshar:

Things are difficult here. It was different for us. We were taught to look after the whole family: aunties, uncles, cousins. But things are different here because girls have to go to school. When they get back from school they have homework and housework as well. We can't expect them to do as much for the family as we did.

In these difficult circumstances what migrant women have found invaluable has been the social support offered to them by others of the same faith, language and culture. For many the one permanent point of identity has been their faith:

But when you face Mecca and say the *nemaz*, then you feel safe and protected (Mrs A).

Even though faith and its attendant rituals change over time, nevertheless it provides both a social and a psychological anchor. But faith is not necessarily seen as bounded and exclusive. Migrants can, and often do, see themselves as part of their kin groups (*biradari*), their birthplace, their country of origin and the host country. Some also see themselves as part of the generality of humanity. In response to the question 'how would you describe your ethnicity?' D, who is 80 and a devout Muslim who prays five times a day, reads the Qur'an and fasts at Ramadan, told us, through an interpreter, that her faith was very important to her but she saw herself as a 'human being'.

In terms of the multiple identities that they had, the young Muslim women we talked to saw Islam as one that connected them to a world of believers, *umma*, which in their terms knew no national or ethnic boundaries, far less kinship restrictions. As C explained to Afshar:

We are at one with our brothers and sisters, here and the ones in Palestine and Iraq; we are all Muslims.

Their own understanding of their identity in terms of faith was closer to that of their 'white' British and Irish born sisters who had chosen Islam as their faith than to those of the cradle Muslims, their kin group, their parents or co-nationals. They were part of the universal revival that moved beyond the 'identity face' of Islamism (Ali, 2000) and created what may be called the 'feminist face' of Islamism (Karam,

1998).⁵ This is an identity, which embraces the trans-nationality of *umma* and does not confine itself to minority Muslim groups; faith supersedes nationality (Schmidt, 2002) and race and ethnicity, without replacing them. The Islamic views that these women have are based on the work of Islamist feminists the world over and are 'non-negotiable'.⁶ Too often the ethnic group imposes 'traditional' demands and restrictions on younger women, which have not been 'internalised' by them and which they often find hard to accept. There is often a gap between parental expectations and the willingness of younger women to act according to their demands (Barth, 2000; Jacobson, 1997). The differences of views are sometimes more intense amongst young revivalist women who are born and bred, or largely raised, in the West. They frequently disagree with the interpretations of Islam of their parents. As P, a young British-born women of Gujarati descent told Afshar:

I didn't want to go the Mosque school, it was boring and I didn't understand anything. But it's different now. We talk about things and read for ourselves and find out what's what. Now I can teach my mum. ... We have a lot of arguments, but I think that she is pleased with me all the same.

Their British education and the demands it makes of them to have enquiring minds creates a new and more individualistic approach to understanding which results in a new 'British form of Islam' (Vallely and Brown, 1995). This 'modern' Islamic interpretation is part and parcel of the Islamist feminists' political and intellectual development over the past centuries the world over (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Afshar, 1998a; Ahmed, 1992). Through the twentieth century they have used their access to better educational opportunities to grasp knowledge about their faith away from recitation, *qara'at*, towards understanding, *tafhim*, and commentary on the texts, *tafsir* (Afshar, forthcoming). Muslim feminists are not willing to hand over their hard earned new opportunities to anyone, least of all religious zealots who have a specific agenda that does not include the liberation of women.

Nationality, Culture and Community

Across the world politicised Islamist women have been reading the Qur'an and holy texts; offering their own interpretations of their Islamic rights, and writing about and fighting for these rights. The material, often translated into English, is freely available on the web and much discussed by various Islamist women groups. But the material used by international Islamist feminisms is seen by some Muslims migrants as a threat to their cultures and communities and their understanding of nationalities and the wider *umma*.

Region and country of origin, together with religion, have formed dominant markers in popular and official understandings of multicultural communities. In the case of Southall in West London, Baumann argues that a dominant model exists which tends to equate community, defined in terms of region or country of origin and sometimes religion, with culture. So Southallians act on a model of 5 communities, White, Black, Asian-Sikh, Asian-Muslim and Asian-Hindu each with their own culture (Baumann, 1996, 1997). However, this model of distinct ethnic communities masks the differences within them and alternative bases of community and identity.

Migrants' individual and group experiences contribute towards the re-construction of their specific understanding of nationality. Much of the ethnic identity of migrant groups is shaped by their history of migration and their hopes and aspirations for return and the reconstruction of their communities, often in the remembered images of the past, within the new host society. The situation and circumstances in which women find themselves in the host countries have an important impact on identity formation (Ghorashi, 2003). The nation is imagined (Makdisi, 1990) and referred to 'as something outside' the self (Cohen, 2002b, p. 165). But 'for the purposes of personal identity the nation is reconstructed and mediated through the self' (Cohen, 2002b, p. 166). It is also constructed through the stories of 'authentic' pasts that help shape the dreams of the future (Subramaniam, 2003, p. 161). For the first generation of migrants, particularly amongst the kin group there is little need to define what is meant by the nation since there are clear points of reference, particular places, people and stories that can be repeated (Afshar, 1989b). They know where they came from, why they came and who they were (Afshar, 1994); they define themselves in terms of their kin groups, their social position and the locality in which they had grown up. Some of the older women who talked to Franks defined themselves as Gujarati or North Pakistani. But most of the women who had migrated to Britain needed a wider categorisation. The move from birthplace to where they live now, sometimes passing through a different continent on the way, had given many of our participants a hyphenated sense of identity. In an interview conducted as part of our older women study, R, who is 64, responded via an interpreter:

I am a British Muslim. But because I belong to Pakistan, I am Pakistani as well, I still have my family there and I still go back.

For some, the migration had been a painful process. F told Franks about coming to England at the age of three:

My father came here in 1963 just a few months before I was actually born. When my dad decided he was going to stay in England he asked my mum to come over and she refused because I already had three older sisters and she didn't want to leave them ... Finally my dad sent one of his cousins to persuade her. My mother talks to me about it and I find it really quite painful, the way my sisters were left behind.

Migration not only wrenched maternal and kinship roots but also made such women into 'ethnic minorities'. They were labelled with a unifying ascribed group identity (Afshar, 1994; Rouse, 1995) that may or may not have accorded with their own notions of self and nationhood. Though different groups have different histories and different memories, their shared 'nationality' in Britain is based in a communality of historical points, often a shared education, kinship and language that has enabled groups of similar background to assume a shared understanding. Mrs T told Afshar:

We came over to my brother. He had a job, was a mechanic and he had a house. It was a bit tight, but we were happy. He got work for my husband and then we slowly found our feet.

The communality of experience is more intense within the kin group (Afshar, 1989a) and groups of the same social and class background and considerably less

so amongst the groups with different political views and aspirations. Thus even first generation migrants are sharply divided by class, education and politics and some feel closer to the host society than to their own. This is particularly true of women, such as divorcées or widows, who may have found it advantageous to migrate independently to start a new life. Mrs Z, a teacher who left Pakistan after a difficult divorce for a job in Britain, taking her daughters with her, told Afshar that she rejoiced in her new 'anonymity':

It was nice to be yourself. Nobody minded about the divorce and all that. Nobody wanted to blame me, I was just a teacher. It was just great not being fingered, being yourself and doing your job. It makes my life worth living.

Historically, nationalities have usually been bestowed by men to their descendents and there has been a tendency to see women's domesticity and care as the building blocks of culture and an effective means of securing a sense of community and ethnic identity. Women help to shape, develop and re-create the differing cultures and histories that they find themselves in. Culture in this context is understood not as an 'add on' but as an integral part of human beings and their relationships with others (Bhavnani, Foran and Kurian, 2003). It is these inter-active processes that enable 'migrant' Muslim women to participate as active agents of change and who conceptualise the norms, mores, habits and customs that shape their lives. Amongst the older women who talked to Afshar one of the most effective in terms of transferring cultural mores was Mrs B whose son had married a 'white' convert. She explained:

All my grandchildren know their *nemaz*. I sit with them and we read the Qur'an and I tell them about our religion and about our village [in Pakistan]. My daughter in law usually joins us ... She is a great cook, she can make perfect chapattis. We work together and we both enjoy it.

But there are tensions and cleavages between the genders and generations in terms of choice and prioritisations. They differ in their preferences in matters such as dress codes and cooking. Younger women may choose to replace the traditional scarf such as those worn by their mothers by the stricter *hijab*, which covers the head and is not loosely hung on shoulders but often they also discard the traditional *shalwar kameez* in favour of jeans and loose shirts. As N who is a highly educated accountant and *mohajabeh* told Afshar:

If you wear trousers and sort of things like suits then they don't mind the *hijab* so much ... so it's easier to wear trouser suits and that sort of thing.

Though on formal family celebrations, most women of South Asian origin revert to the beautiful sari or *shalwar kameez*.

First generation migrant women create their own power base by re-constructing their 'nations' through stories, food and networks that create a functional power base for them within the domestic sphere. Hospitality, good food and care are seen by the older generation as an inalienable part of the culture and networking. Talking to older women Afshar found the conversations punctuated by delicious

snacks and long discussions about how to cook samosas or how to make the perfect rice dish. Often the latter resulted in long arguments about the advantages and disadvantages of the distinct ways that Persians and Pakistanis cook rice. To prove who had the best method these discussions were followed by the inevitable demonstrations and general meals shared by all. But for the younger women, who are often in full time employment, cooking has become more and more simplified and the 'authentic' food is only to be found in the home of grandmothers. N explained:

I can't be bothered to cook after a long day at work. It's so easy to pick up a pizza or a samosa on the way home. It's quick and less hassle. So usually I don't cook.

Thus of necessity 'cuisine', which may be recognised as an important cultural signifier (Samad, 1998a), becomes diluted, changed and frequently acquires British characteristics which are included for convenience and to speed up the process of cooking.

For the older generations food remains of central cultural and emotional importance. Talking about and remembering the funeral ceremony with a sense of achievement a Muslim widow told us, as part of our 2001 ESRC funded older women study:

I cooked, my daughters and my daughters-in-law cooked a lot of food and it was very nice food and everybody shared. We had a lovely time ... we really had a lovely time ... It was good while everybody's there ...

Whereas culture may be developed and perpetuated by women, it may be argued that nationality is a poor identifier for women; for long it has applied differently across the gender divides. The historical construction of nationhood and nationalism is masculine in terms of its character and demands (Adnan, 1993; Afshar, 2003; Basch, 1997). Women who have been the bearers of the nations have been given the nationalities of their father and their husband and, when migrating, have lost their birth right to their homeland only to acquire that of the male on whom they have been defined as a 'dependent'. They are subject to laws and requirements that are formulated and articulated as if all citizens were male. The construction of nation and citizenship on the basis of 'fictitious ethnicities' (Radcliffe and Westwood, 1993) make women invisible, and do not meet their needs and demands. It is therefore not surprising that the primary identification of many of the older generation of British Pakistanis is with country or region of origin, rather than their relatively newly acquired British identity. Though they make the assumption that they are Muslim (Modood, Berthoud, Lakey, Nazroo, Smith, Virdee and Beishon, 1997; Samad, 1998b, pp. 432–3).

Second-generation migrant women have little reason to revert to a nationality that they have not experienced. Often they have not even seen their homelands; P, a British born girl of Pakistani origins who has never visited Pakistan, told Afshar:

'Pakistan' for me brings images of beautiful jungles and wild deer running along rivers.

On the other hand Z, who had visited her parental village as a tourist, said that what was memorable for her was: 'How lovely the village was in the spring and the delicious food that kept on coming.'

Other young women who had returned to rural areas have told other researchers that they were struck by the general levels of poverty, the lack of facilities and the restrictions placed on them (Jacobson, 1998). Young women who returned to cities were struck by the level of freedom and mobility enjoyed by women who had not been raised in the ossified atmosphere of being an ethnic minority in the West (Afshar, 1994). They found it hard to re-construct their national identity on the basis of their brief visits and the myths and stories heard from their mothers. They are all too aware that these re-created notions of nationhood were both idealised and unreal (Afshar, 1989b). Y, who is a young graduate, told Afshar:

Going back was OK. But I can't say that I wanted to stay. It was OK for a visit, but I missed my friends and felt a bit awkward. I couldn't really speak the language and wasn't too sure about what to do. I was really ready to come back even though it was warm there and it's always cold here.

But the younger generation could not easily define themselves as British. In the 1980s many young schoolgirls told Afshar (1989b) that 'British' meant 'white' nationals. In the playground even those who were born and bred in the UK felt excluded by colour and creed. E told Afshar:

We just hangout together and they are on the other side [of the playground]. We don't go to their house and they don't come here.

The distrust was re-enforced by the family. Mrs B told Afshar:

My granddaughter likes to go to play at her friend's house. But I always tell her not to go inside their houses, because you don't know what kind of people come to their houses.

They, their mothers and grandmothers were all seen by the host society as 'immigrants'. They could choose a hyphenated British-Muslim identity. But the boundaries created by such a label hide the complex intra- and inter-familial tension as well as the links and friendships made across the boundaries. Østberg expresses this complexity rejecting hyphenated identity as an analytical concept and replacing it with the concept of 'integrated plural identity' (2003, p. 167). However by 2003 when the Muslim Diaspora research was conducted, when questioned, many amongst the younger generation saw themselves as 'British Pakistani Muslims'. When asked 'what country do you define as your home country?', 23 of the 90 women defined their country as being Britain or England but of these only two were older women over 60 years of age. 21 participants described themselves as Pakistani – although these were mostly older women, two were under 19 and one of these was born in the UK. Two women described themselves as 'both' and one said: 'I'm not sure – Pakistani I think'. The majority who defined themselves as Pakistani were born in Pakistan and the majority who defined themselves as English were born in England. The older women who participated in the ESRC research gave more complex identities as they were asked how they would describe

their ethnicity. Since they were responding via an interpreter their replies may well have been influenced by the perceived necessity to explain the complexities to someone who was not of their own background.

It may be that new technologies such as mobiles and the Internet have transformed relationships for young Pakistani people. Knott and Khokher (1993) and Østberg (2003) have observed the fluidity that has developed between apparently opposing cultural styles. Østberg (2003) writes of the ease with which Norwegian Pakistani children move between cultures and quotes Saima (14) who said 'I am wearing hijab and listening to techno' without expressing any conflict between these aspects of her identity. Similarly Khalid contacted his friends and Norwegian girlfriends by mobile phone and got to know the cousin in Pakistan, whom he was most likely to marry, by chatting on the Internet.

Hybridity

The interactions of history, cultures and societies and the dynamic processes of change construct identities, which are pluralist, fluid, multifaceted and multidimensional (Fischer, 1986; Friedman, 1994; Giddens, 1991). Identities are much more of a process of change and continuity rather than a static attribute.⁷ The continuity is sustained by shared memories, stories and cultural practices, change is both a reaction to circumstances and a process of negotiations that result in a multiplicity of identities that 'may or may not contradict each other' (Ghorashi, 2003, p. 29).

However multiple identities are not disempowering, they may have a situational aspect. Where individuals have a choice in defining their identities then aspects of identity may be mobilised in different situations: they may present themselves differently in different contexts (Edwards, 1998; Ghorashi, 2003), they can adopt a single or a hyphenated identity. Women of all generations may think of themselves as migrants, as wives, mothers, or as 'British Muslims'.

Muslim women who talked to us generally accepted cultural, ethnic and national identities that defined them differently in different circumstances. Hybridity and hyphenated identities come more easily to women who through their life cycles move along and between identities. They are not necessarily 'assimilated', but many share the problems of women as a whole and have communality of experience with white convert Muslim women who also cannot easily 'assimilate' within their own society. In terms of construction of an identity both the person and the face that they present is distinct and different from that of the older generation of Muslim women, it is also different from the youth-led Islamist revival (Castells, 1997) in the West.

However, migrants such as R often do not have agency and cannot exercise a choice; they live in contexts of unequal powers (Bhabha, 1994; Ghorashi, 2003) that disregard their understandings of who they are and categorise them as 'migrants' thereby ascribing identities to them in terms of their creed, colour or ethnicity. Nevertheless even within the Muslim community the need to retain a hyphenated identity remains real and powerful. It may be that young Muslim women with their shared concept of *umma* and their commitment to being British

may be forging a new way towards social and political cohesion through hybridity. As politically active Muslims they choose from the raft of Muslim societies those that reflect their views most closely. Within these societies they often initiate changes both in terms of internal politics and in terms of the recognition given to them and to their demands, without necessarily losing their ties with the host community. Younger women members of Muslims UK and the Islamic Society of Britain and FOSIS (Federation of Student Islamic Societies in the UK and Ireland) are from Arab, African, South Asian and white British backgrounds.⁸ They told Franks (2001) that they were interested 'in finding ways of being Muslim and British'. One respondent, the daughter of an Indian father and a white English mother, talked about the problems she faced as an English Muslim who could not find a place for herself in either community. She reported how some members of the white community hurled abuse whilst many Muslims, 'more influenced by their cultures than faith found it hard to "locate" an "English Muslim"' (Franks, 2001, p. 137). As Zb, a high flying professional woman of Sudanese mother and a British father, told Afshar:

I can never say that I am British, because if I do they always say: 'but where are you from originally?'

Faith

Hizb ut-Tahrir demands of its followers not to participate in the British political process. An angry young man, UZ, told Afshar:

My future wife is coming over and they want her to swear an oath of allegiance to the Queen. But she can't do that. It would be demeaning to swear an oath because we Muslims owe allegiance only to God Almighty.

But many English-Muslims find it hard to accept *Hizb ut-Tahrir's* demand that they should discard their British identity and become just Muslims. Though an important political statement in dealing with Islamophobia, this is a suggestion that is almost impossible for many to accept uncritically. The 'Muslim community' in West Yorkshire is a multicultural community: it notionally includes African, Middle Eastern, South and South East Asian as well as white British and Irish Muslims. There are considerable cultural and linguistic differences between these societies and internally amongst each group. They adhere to different Sunni schools or are Shiias, Ahmadiyyas or Ismaelis. There are doctrinal differences on rituals such as celebrations of the Prophet's Birthday and on legal matters concerning details of marital contracts and even about the correct method of washing before prayers and the names called in the *ashahd* during the daily prayer. The main Mosques often make exclusive claim to orthodoxy, but where numbers permit there are smaller mosques that meet the needs of the different cultures and smaller groups (Lewis, 1994; Vertovec, 1998). There are also linguistic divisions amongst the Arabs, Persians and Pakistanis, as well as between them and Indian Gujarati and Bangladeshi Bengali speaking Muslims. Muslims in West Yorkshire are divided by their religiously and ethnically defined communities. They recreate their cultures on the basis of mutually independent cleavages of language, regional background

and national loyalties. Kinship networks support and enhance these divides (Afshar, 1989a; Vertovec, 1998). Most marriages and joint commercial activities usually take place within *biradari* kinship groups (Ballard, 2001; Jacobson, 1998). Political alliances are usually made amongst specific *biradari* groups and endorsed by the community mosque. Many of the older generations are more involved and interested in the politics of their homelands and tend to accept the mosque's lead in voting in the UK. There is reluctance to vote for 'outsiders'. Politics is understood and participation secured through kin and community networks. The moral economy of kin (Afshar, 1989a) demands that the younger generation elect the kin groups' candidate, despite the reality that the young often have political positions that do not necessarily accord with those of their parents. The fears engendered by Islamophobia and the dependence of many Muslims on support within their communities make it much harder for the young to resist kin pressure in matters of local politics and at times of elections. *Biradari* kin groups are able to deliver local councillors who sometimes do not even speak English, but who have the support of their community. As Muhammad Ajeeb, who was Bradford's first Asian Lord Mayor in 1985 told the BBC:

Biradari plays a very dominant role in Pakistani politics. ... Culture dictates that the elders' word is gospel. It is very difficult for younger members and women to change anything. (*Biradaris*, BBC4, 26 August 2003)

There is a generational divide, in terms of political and social adherence and activities, which is not easily bridged and is becoming increasingly more pronounced. Amongst the youth, Islam has become a more important identity signifier than it is for their parents (Samad, 1998b). Some even argue that the faith demands that they withdraw from everyday British politics and concentrate on the faith and its teachings. Others are far less certain. Whereas young women either choose the *hijab* or adopt their hyphenated identities, young men often have difficulty in defining themselves in terms of host or kin community. Some have been described as being perched precariously between the role models of 'Lord Ahmed and Ali G' (Lewis, 2001). In West Yorkshire some young second and third generation males project:

a 'hard' image of tough aggressive macho men ... [and claim] membership of *Hamas* and *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* ... Yet the same individuals do not know what *Hamas* or *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* represent and are unaware who the Shiias are, and how they differ from Sunnis. (Samad, 1998b, p. 434)

However for these and other young Muslims, Islam as a religion is a core part of their personal and political identity, yet their interpretation of Islam is different from that of their parents. Given that 'identities are the product of exclusion' and constructed through difference in relation to the 'other' (Hall, 1996), it maybe that this particular kind of masculine youth identity needs to be considered in the light of 'compensatory masculinities' which are constructed by minority youth and which are 'racialised' and 'ethnicified' (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002; Majors, 1990; Sewell, 1997) and are formed in opposition to the experience of oppression and dominant discourses of masculinity and attainments. Following the 1995 Bradford 'riot', members of the Pakistani Muslim community attributed its

manifestation on the expressed frustration of 'disempowered and disenfranchised youth' (Burlet and Reid, 1998).

But there are young Muslims brought up in Britain who have a clear understanding of their faith. They are literate in English and their understanding of Islam is textual, often produced by Islamist groups in English, while their parents' mainly derives from an oral tradition (Samad, 1998b, p. 434). This generational divide is countered by a greater proximity of views and attitudes amongst some of the younger generation of Muslims. The language divide, which separated the communities, is bridged by the young who generally are fluent in English and not in their own mother tongues (Jacobson, 1998, pp. 96–8; Samad, 1998b, pp. 431–2; Lewis, 2001). An interviewee, who was a member of Young Muslims UK, told Franks how she was introduced to the Qur'an as a child and made to read it at the Madrasa but it was only when her brother introduced her to an English translation that she was able to connect with it and reoriented her life toward Islam.

However there is a gender divide and some of the young women have very different interpretations of the teachings of Islam from their male counterparts. Indeed in the current work of diaspora that we are conducting we found that in one university where it was felt that *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, who were indeed all men, had taken over the Islamic society, the women started their own organisation. Given the gendered understanding that traditional *Hizb ut-Tahrir* supporters have it would not have been easy for them to oppose the segregation. They had to accept that most women have different understanding and priorities. This is not to say that there are no female supporters of *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. In specific cases such as the Women's Seminar 'Hijab ban in France', (on the 21 January 2004 there was a meeting in London), organised by Sisters of *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. It was supported by men and women. There was also a general appeal to the French government not to ban the headscarf from schools and public sector places of work. But often, as in the case of the young women who in the 1980s embraced Islam, and decided to wear the *hijab* as an act of solidarity with the *umma*, there are differences of interpretations, particularly in terms of the practicalities of living and working as 'Muslims'. As 'British Muslims' they did not always share the cultural ideas that their Muslim employers and parents retained. The docility required of these women as employees and as children who should accept practices such as arranged marriages, was difficult to negotiate. Not only the host community, but also some members of the faith community were ascribing an Islamic identity to these women that was not one that they themselves had adopted (Afshar, 1994; Samad, 1996).

September 11 and the subsequent intensification of Islamophobia (Allen and Nielsen, 2002) created a social context that constructed new meanings (Castells, 1997) that produced both solidarity and further tensions between generations and youths and young women in the Muslim community as well as between the hosts and the Muslim communities.

Though by 1993, 87 percent of second generation 16–24 year-olds were born in the UK (Jones, 1993), young Muslims found that they were still ascribed with an identity that defined them as 'migrants' and, after September 11, as 'Muslims' who carried attributes of fear, terrorism and discord. The host society and the media were ascribing identities to these people that distanced them from the host and

connected them to a constructed notion of their faith group. The new labels of 'evil', 'the enemy within' and 'terrorist' allowed little room for manoeuvre. Many reacted by defining themselves as Muslims. In a recent set of interviews, conducted as part of a current Toronto based international study of Muslim Diaspora, a majority of the younger participants said that their faith had become stronger in recent years. The faith that they embrace is not necessarily the traditional beliefs that their elders wish them to have. Nor is their Islam limited to culture or constrained by the diaspora; their Islam is one that makes part of an imagined dynamic, unbounded world community – the *umma*. This is a righteous, strong and united Islam, which does not prevent them from retaining their identities as British, Pakistanis or Gujaratis, but encompasses all those identities within a permeable unbounded communality of dreams and aspirations. The imagined community that the young refer to is not a homeland, it is not a geographical place and there is no intention of return. They have a universalistic Islamist consciousness that is not so much diasporic (Saint-Blancat, 2002) as rooted in the global concept of *umma*, the geographically unbounded single community of believers. There is no homeland; the earthly experience is merely a path towards the eternity. It is the correct path *seratol mostaqim* that matters, not the earthly political or regional divides. For many women the first steps on that path are through the adoption of a strict dress code and the wearing of the *hijab*.

Hijab

The decision to choose the *hijab* has not meant that the women concerned have abandoned their 'British' nationality. Many of the *mohajabebs*, the veiled women are comfortable with a multiplicity of identities and have defined themselves in terms of faith and nationality as British Muslims. In this there is a unity of understanding, aspirations and a communality of belonging that is shared by Muslim women across the boundaries of race, ethnicity and place of birth. For them there is little need to abandon the hyphenated British-Muslim identity for the singularity of political Islam. These *mohajabebs'* hyphenated identity is part of the complex self-ascribed identities that they share with some Muslim men. For instance many male and female members of the Young Muslims UK, who talked to Franks, were associating themselves with being British and Muslim. But young radical Muslims, who do define themselves as exclusively Muslim and not necessarily British, have labelled YMUK and Islamic Society of Britain as 'Lassi Muslims' (the equivalent of Champagne socialists). However it is precisely within this forward looking Islamist context that young women of all colours and ethnicities can fit and function. Often women who define themselves as Muslim have a clear appreciation of both the rewards and the duties and obligations that the faith imposes on believers in their every day lives. These may not be the same as that which the more zealous men assume to be part of what Islam means in terms of rights and entitlements. The choice to wear the *hijab* is a political act defining these women as 'different' and as Muslims at a time when rampant Islamophobia makes them vulnerable to attack and harassment for this act of defiance. However not all *mohajabebs* had initially sought to engage in a political act of resistance. Islamophobia defines them as 'subversive' and they have to cope with their ascribed identities of the enemy within. What the *mohajabebs* often had sought had been a 'good Muslim man' who would

know and respect the rights of women. But this expectation does not sit comfortably with the desires of many of their radical Muslim male counterparts who prefer to seek a submissive bride from 'back home'. So many of the *mohajabeh* find themselves of necessity obliged to fight for their rights on all fronts.

Frequently the women who chose to wear the veil do not come from families who practice seclusion or insist on wearing the *hijab*; their mothers and grandmothers dress modestly, if from the subcontinent often they wore the 'traditional' sari or *shalwar kameez*, but not the *hijab*. The head cover, which has been worn by young women, particularly in the West, is very much the product of the late twentieth century. It is a reconstructed emblem that allows them to combine jeans and jackets and the latest style in kitten heel shoes with the new tradition of the *hijab*. This is not a dress code that finds approval amongst some members of *Hizb ut-Tahrir*. The clothes worn by the new *mohajabehs* are very distinct and different from that of their mothers and earlier generations of women in their kin groups. Far from an indication of submission or docility the decision to wear the *hijab* makes a public statement that places the *mohajabehs* in the full light of the public gaze; something the parents and kin groups do not necessarily wish to see. It may even be seen as a clear indication of their new radical interpretation of the faith that they define as liberating rather than constraining. These views may well make it harder for parents to marry off their newly veiled daughters in arranged marriages. An interviewee for the Muslim Diaspora research, an art student and who wears *hijab*, told Franks: 'The more Islamic I become the less likely it is I will be pushed into an unwanted marriage'. This is because the parents are unable to criticise if she is following Qur'anic teaching. Young women often use their textual understanding of Islam to contest the traditions and restriction imposed on them by their parents.⁹

Conclusions

Muslim women are creating a feminist political identity, which embraces the transnationality of *umma* and does not confine itself to minority Muslim groups; faith supersedes nationality (Schmidt, 2002) and race and ethnicity. Islam and *umma* as a political space facilitate the development of hyphenated identities. Young revivalist women who are born and bred or largely raised in the West fiercely oppose Islamophobia but also they often disagree with the cultural interpretations of Islam of their parents. Alliances between Muslim women of different colours and ethnicities and their radical interpretations of Islam and its teachings have helped create a new dynamic formulation of British Islamic identity that is bridged by bonds of friendship and scholarship. Their lived experiences make it possible for them to have hyphenated identities which are experienced as an enrichment rather than a lack. The new Muslims may be 'Lassi Muslims', but they are also enlightened, cohesive and able to place themselves within both their kin and their community groups and within the host society. They may be the ones who reach out and even marry across the ethnic divides and forge religious alliances. They are the groups who are least likely to respond to the political demands of the zealous on either side of the faith and ethnicity divide. It may be that the realities of the

lives and choices made by the new *mohajabebs* mark the first steps towards a new multicultural national identity and cohesion.

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Notes

- 1 *Hizb ut-Tahrir* defines itself as a 'political party whose ideology is Islam, so politics is its work and Islam is its ideology'. Available at: <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/english/>.
- 2 For the purposes of this article, Islamist is used to refer to groups who are choosing to use Islam specifically as a means of creating political allegiances and solidarities. *Al Muhajerin* is a voluntary organisation dedicated to giving da'wah to both Muslims and Non Muslims. Da'wah is explained to mean a 'call' or 'invitation', used to refer to a person being 'called' to follow Islam. However in October 2004, *Al-Muhajerin* closed its web site and announced that it was dissolving and ceasing its activities (*Guardian*, 13 October 2004).
- 3 In this paper we will be using Franks' definitions for revivalism and its membership. Franks (2001) defines the 'revivalist way' as the modern-day path of a total commitment to Islam. In the case of Islam this may follow the classic revivalist pattern, described by Yvonne Haddad, of an initial love affair with Westernization and secularism quickly followed by disenchantment and an impassioned return to Islam (Haddad, 1983). The members of 'revivalist movements' are 'those seeking a "pristine" tradition of Islam ... stripped of all accretions. Present day revivalist movements in ... Islam share this longing for an authenticity which they perceive in the early Islamic community. But this authenticity tends to be constructed in the likeliness of dominant discourses of the time from which believers and scholars attempt to discern it' (Franks, 2001, p. 11).
- 4 Will Cummins is the pseudonym of Harry Cummins, a senior British Council Press officer who was sacked on the 1 September 2004. But the Sunday Telegraph has not retracted any of the statements made by Cummings in a series of Islamophobic articles published over three Sundays in July 2004.
- 5 Islamism is used here to denote the newly emerging forms of Islam as political activism (Hale, 1996; Ismail, 2003; Nafi, 1998; Sayyid, 1998).
- 6 There has been a continuing dialogue amongst scholars about Islamic feminisms. There is a group who have argued that it is possible to include as feminists Islamist women who are using the faith as a means of accessing rights and entitlements both in the private and public spheres (Afshar, 1995, 1998a, 1998b; Cooke, 2001; Karam, 1998; Mojab, 2001; Warnock Fernea, 1998). Cohen emphasises that while the ethnicity communicated to others may be contingent and variable, this is not to say that people do not invest hugely in identities and views of themselves, which they may not see as 'negotiable' (Cohen, 2000a, p. 5).
- 7 Barth, 1994; Bhavnanai and Phoenix, 1994; Fischer-Rosenthal, 1995; Ghorashi, 2003.
- 8 The Islamic Society of Britain and Young Muslims UK define themselves as a national organisation that aims to bring together Muslims and help them to use their common knowledge skills and efforts for the benefit of one another and British society as a whole, through the promotion of Islam and Islamic values. The Federation of Student Islamic Societies in the UK and Ireland defines itself as 'the premier Muslim Student representative body' and 'strives hard to uphold the motto: "And hold fast to the rope of Allah, all of you together, and be not disunited" (Quran, 3, 103)'. Available at: http://www.fosis.org.uk/about/intro_to_fosis.htm.
- 9 Ali, 1992; Jacobson, 1998, pp. 107–9; Samad, 1998b, p. 435; Shaw, 1988.

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