

British Muslim Women, National Identities and Cosmopolitanism
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The paper traces the ways in which women British born South Asian Muslim convey and embody cosmopolitan ways of being. The young women's accounts show that in the majority of instances they do not manifest a binary view of Britain and South Asia but that their narratives include many contradictions. For example, they exhibit cosmopolitan traits such as that of openness, flexibility, and appreciation to cultures and lifestyles. I observed that even within religious spheres such as the mosque the women expressed cosmopolitan identities. Additionally, on an on-line discussion thread women explored questions of Islamic ways of being in diverse ways seeking their Islamic knowledges from varying sources including British terrestrial television documentary programmes. Much scholarship on second generation diasporic communities has tended to narrowly focus on questions of identity formation and citizenship. These studies have mainly relied on recounting their experiences within nation-states where they hold the legal status of citizenship. In this age of sophisticated technology and global interconnectedness with faster and rapid travelling means and modes to one's homeland and even to one's parents' and grand parents' homeland the idea of nationhood and belonging becomes much more porous. Hence, it becomes crucial to examine wider questions of belonging which transcend national boundaries.

I spent twelve months regularly attending two mosques in a Northern city- Manchester where Islamic study circles were convened. One was held at a mosque for younger people called the Muslim Youth Foundation and the other at a Mosque in the suburb of Manchester, Longsight. In addition, I also visited the Multi-Faith Centre at the

University of Central Lancashire, Preston where I hold the post of a lecturer. Manchester is a major city located in the North West of England and around the turn of the 19th century, it was part of the industrial revolution, known for its textile industry and cotton mills. Today it faces regeneration and uneven development with much investment being put mainly into its city centre. The greater Manchester area is reported to have a population size of 2,240,230 (2001 census). In 2001, 80% of people identified themselves as White, 9% Asian or Asian British, 5% Black or Black British, 3% Mixed Race and 2% Chinese or other ethnic group. 9.1% of Manchester's population includes Muslims. Certain areas in Manchester such as Rusholme and Longsight have higher concentrations of Muslim population. The city of Preston has a population size of 166,675. According to the 2001 census, 71.5% of the population were Christians, 9.8% had no religion and 8.2% were Muslims. Hindu and Sikh populations are smaller at 2.6% and 0.6% respectively but significant because this represents the highest percentage in the North West region.

In addition to visiting mosques in Manchester and Preston I also explored an Islamic on-line discussion thread over a period of six months.

There has been much interest and focus on cosmopolitanism. Beck (2002) defines the notion of cosmopolitan as an alternative ways of viewing life and rationalities which include the otherness of others. He argues that this view differs from a national perspective which 'excludes the otherness of the other.' Hence, from his perspective there is an apparent tension between cosmopolitan and national identities. Other scholars understand cosmopolitans as elite travellers focused on novel experiences, incapable of forming lasting attachments and commitments (e.g. Featherstone 2000a, 2002). Similarly, Urry (1995) argues that the cosmopolitan is a highly mobile, curious, open, and reflexive subject having the competence to navigate in an increasingly diverse and hybridized

global context. Werbner (2006) discusses the notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism and raises a very significant question of whether travel necessary leads to openness and self reflexivity. She further argues that much depends on the environment in which one lives in where some situations may be more cosmopolitan than others. While some scholars have debated about the extent to which cosmopolitanism may be linked with elites; the working class; or transnationals, others have attempted to reconcile tensions between nationalism, citizenship, and cosmopolitanism. Molz (2005) argues that cosmopolitan citizenship includes certain obligations at both the national and global level. He suggests that in order to perform global citizenship one must enact some type of national identification and it is through such national affiliations that travellers convey global responsibility. Similarly Bowden (2003) points out that an awareness of one's own national identity leads to a more universal tolerance and understanding of diversity matters without necessarily travelling to every corner of the globe. Hence, cosmopolitanism has been defined and discussed in complex ways. However, missing somewhat from this discussion are the ways in which diasporic and religious communities experience cosmopolitanism. There has been even less of a discussion on women and cosmopolitanism where women are often associated with being at 'home' as being opposed to being 'abroad.' (Featherstone, 2002). .With increased and rapid global connections, children of immigrants are more likely than ever to visit their parents' homeland as well as other countries where they may feel both an insider and outsider to the particular culture. For example, they may a feel a sense of affective loyalty towards their parents' homeland but at the same time find themselves adopting a cosmopolitan stance as they might experience somewhat differing cultural/religious/political situations

by virtue of having raised and brought up in Western developed nations. Often enough, second and third generation visiting their parents' homeland get treated as foreigners and even in some instances get denigrated for being 'in between cultures.' For example Tanya describes her visit to her homeland in the following way: I don't exactly see myself living there but I really really really liked it. I found everything to be intriguing to be honest.

Like in the middle of nowhere you see cows. (Laughs) It's like the whole thing. You are amazed by it. It was things like that. Not that I like animals. I hate animals. It was just nice seeing things and connecting it back to your own experience. You don't really care about that. (Laughs). And then what are these things doing here. And what are you doing now.

These comments no doubt convey Tahira's cosmopolitan stance. She is obviously not very accustomed to watching animals appear on the streets of England but she consumes these events she encounters in Jhelum with a tourist like fascination. As Turner (2002) suggests that in the case of cosmopolitans are from urban areas they may tend to display certain responsibility towards more rural or aboriginal culture. Tanya does not may not exactly express an interest in the preservation of primitive cultures but she does display much fondness for the life style she encounters, thus showing an appreciation for the rural lifestyle.

Tanya describes her visit to the largest city in Pakistan in very different ways then when she describes her visit to the hometown:

T: It's like Karachi never shuts down. When I go there we usually don't go there for very long. It's usually for a family wedding or something like that. And you don't want to go to sleep because you don't want to miss a minute. I'm there I want to absorb it all. I find myself you know just pack in as much as possible. Not a minute to waste. And I do sometimes end up sitting there just absorb it all through the pores of my skin. You know trying to take something home of that feeling where you can go out till three o'clock or four o'clock.

Tanya's understanding of Karachi a city with 15 million people is significant. She understands it to be a major bustling city which 'never shuts down' whereby she notes it to be different from what she is normally accustomed to. She does not consider Karachi to be necessarily her home but more of an experience when she states 'you know trying to take something home of that feeling where you can go out till three o'clock or four o'clock.' The manner in which she describes Karachi could be compared to almost any major city such as New York or London where people may go out till all night long. Tanya's distinctive characterization of Karachi also shows her open attitude towards what a city which many characterized it as highly polluted, crowded and crime ridden. However, Tanya focuses on the night life Karachi does continue to offer despite its many problems. In addition to showing openness towards their parents' homeland almost all of the women I met with enjoyed their travel experience and talked much about travelling to different places. For example, Asiya from Preston pointed out to me: "It's more of a Muslim thing wanting to know more. Wanting to meet different people."

F; Why do you think so?

Asiya: Am not sure. Like my brother he used to travel all around. I think once you meet different people and connect with them you get a thirst for it and you want to do it all the time. Once you have done the travelling you want to do more. After a while you get sick of your house. I think that might be a factor as well. Because we are more family oriented. We stay at home more than other communities. Because other communities tend to go clubbing and everything. Their entertainment is different. So I think we are more likely to want to get out of that and go to a different place and experience something different.

In addition to travels to their homeland, I noted that the Islamic study circles where I met the women also served as a space for the Asian women to display their cosmopolitan ways. For example, the women from Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani origin met with Arabic, Somalian, and White English Muslim women whom they may otherwise not have interacted with. One of the women told me that she really enjoyed socializing with Arabic women during the month of Ramadan and learning about Arabic culture, “It’s so cool, a lot of Arabic women come and stay till the late hours after Ramadan prayers and they just sit and chat about different things. You should come one day.” Many of the women opted to learn Arabic as well and travel to Arab nations such as Jordan and Palestine and countries with Muslim populations such as Bosnia. Additionally, the Muslim Youth Foundation also arranged tours within Europe such as Spain so that the attendees could gain an understanding of Islamic history within Europe. Many of the women participated in these events. Some of the women organized tours to Europe amongst themselves and travelled as a group within Europe. Hence, the religious space facilitated the processes of women crossing national boundaries and attaining a cosmopolitan identity. In the absence of such space, or in the private domains of their lives, these young women might not have so easily

travelled outside Britain because of traditional constraints (see Mohammad, 1999) for a discussion of socio-spatial regulations of Pakistani women in Western spaces) but within the respectable sacred sphere these women had the liberty to travel in groups with other like-minded women.

In this manner, it can be argued that religious spheres helped shape women's cosmopolitan identities; rather than frequenting their local clubs those who had the resources travelled frequently. Thus, the women I met with traversed various boundaries and were not limited to teachings within the mosque. An individual becomes cosmopolitan is by travelling, moving through various cultures, encountering difference, and combining national and global affiliations within the context of mobility (Molz, 2005: 521). The Muslim women I spoke with exhibited many of these traits. Tahira from the MYF circle describes her trip to Granada, Spain, where she went with women from the mosque, with much enthusiasm:

The girls we went with Muslim Association of Britain. We went to Islamic sites and Granada and Valencia and Al Jazeera. We went to Tangiers. We went to the old city and the new city. We did tours of the mosques. We went to the shops for three days in Morocco. In Spain we went to the Cordoba-we visited the great mosque which is now a cathedral.

Tahira exhibits her willingness and enthusiasm to travel to foreign countries to learn about Islamic history and architecture. Here, Muslim women create spaces for themselves which extend beyond the local within religious spheres.

In addition to travelling and exploring different religious sects many of the women I spoke with displayed their cosmopolitanism selves through their openness- learning from non Muslims. Yasmin from the circle at the Longsight mosque a young woman who covered herself fully with a *niqab* expresses the following point of view:

I learn about Islam from my friends. Even from my non practicing friends. I really hate that word non-practicing friends. My definition is always changing. And to me

at the moment it is somebody who displays good manners. That to me feels like more Islam.
Yasmin's statements reveal a cosmopolitan attitude, which includes in the broadest sense a plural way of being.

Asiya, a British Indian Muslim, from Preston, who was a chair of the Multi Faith Centre at the University speaks of crossing boundaries, when she speaks of her reasons to learn Arabic.

There are several reasons why I would like to learn Arabic because when you go abroad you can use it. But the most important reason I'd like to learn Arabic is because the Quran is written in classical Arabic. I'd like to learn classical Arabic...I'd like to learn the modern version. And there are quite a few Arabic sisters on campus. And I'd like to communicate with them.

In her pursuit of Islam, Asiya depicts her openness to interact with Arabic women on campus at the University. On the one hand, her willingness to form friendships with Arabic women could be viewed as another venue to further her knowledge as many young Asian Muslims tend to associate 'authentic Islam' with the Middle East rather than South Asia. However, she does point out that her reasons for learning Arabic was not only to understand the Quran but also to use it when she goes abroad as well as to have a wider network of Muslim friends at the University. Such creations of global spaces once again show the intersection between religious spheres and identity. Atchison et al (1998) write that Muslim identities are often, '... assumed to be connected to traditional Muslim spaces such as areas of Muslim settlement in cities or areas near mosques where *halal* meat can be purchased.' Thus the religious sphere is usually linked with parochialism rather than cosmopolitanism. However, in the above cases it is actually through interactions within the realm of religious spheres that cosmopolitan identities are enacted.

On-line I noted that many of the women contested the ways in which their parents of South Asian parents understood Islam and relied on a vast variety of sources to expand their own understandings of religion. Consider the following:

Shia sister

Re: Feminism

Assalualikum

Islam gives more rights to women then west. I cannot list all of them here. I will give a link to an excellent book on women's right by a great scholar of Islam

<http://www.al-islam.org/WomanRights/index.html>.

Maryam
(Female)

Documentary Tonight

Assalamu Alaikum

Just thght of informing you guys about a documentary tonight, should be interesting, one not to be missed especially for non-muslims, and muslims of weak faith like myself. Channel 4, 6pm, Turning Muslims In Texas. It is only 30 mins long so try not to miss 15 mins of it.

Here's an insight into the programme:

<http://www/Channel4.com/culture/microsites/B/believeitornot/texas1.html>

These excerpts show that these young women are very well informed and knowledgeable of the various sites and spaces which carry relevant information. In doing so, they index cosmopolitan identities which challenge dominant discourses concerning women which often view Muslim women to live behind the veil as having no access to information. Moreover, the fact that these online participants accessed information outside formal religious contexts which further demonstrates their flexibility and openness

in their quest for knowledge and education. Katryn Robinson writes about the flow of global and intellectual exchange among Muslim women in Indonesia. In doing so, she points out the ways in which women use Islamic feminist texts to further their understanding of the religion. However, in this instance young on-line participants engage with information which is perhaps in a way far more accessible and widely disseminated but is also Western a source such as the BBC.

British Asian Muslim women exhibit cosmopolitan identities in several ways. When they travel to their parents' homeland they show acceptance and amazement when confronted with cultural discontinuities. They express curiosity and pleasure when they travel outside their country of residence. Within the religious spheres they show willingness to form alliances and friendships with women of non South Asian origin. They seek religious inspiration and knowledge from non traditional sources such as on-line websites and the media. In doing so, these young women embrace cosmopolitan values which go r beyond negotiating a space in-between the values of the nation-state and their parents' cultural and religious norms. Werbner (2008) argues that diasporas are not intrinsically cosmopolitan but rather many diasporas are open to the world. In this regard, the children of South Asian migrants are no exception where they demonstrate curiosity and willingness to interact and engage in varying ways across and within the boundaries of their nation-states. Finally, my research would not have been possible if the British born Muslim Asian women had not shown their hospitality and openness towards a Pakistani born Asian American with somewhat secular views.

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