

**DE-MYSTIFYING THE *MUSLIMAH*:  
Exploring Different Perceptions of  
Selected Young Muslim Women in Britain**

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## **Abstract**

In this research I argue that although Islam as a faith is inherently emancipatory, Muslim women are doubly marginalised: by patriarchal interpretations of their faith within Muslim communities and by pluralist society that often does not understand the faith-based values and practices of Muslim women. The empowerment of Muslim women is crucial not just for the women themselves but also for socio-political dynamics within the Muslim community and its relationships in pluralist society. It is from this context, and acknowledging the paucity of academic literature written by Muslim women, that I set out to give voice to them, so that their opinions may be heard in discourses that they think are relevant to their lives. By encouraging Muslim women to take voice and by facilitating mechanisms for these voices to be heard, this research presents alternate narratives of Muslim women that challenge dominant media imagery of the oppressed and subjugated Muslim woman. These narratives, which are by and for Muslim women, portray instead the inherent diversity in the category 'Muslim woman' and thus add more facets to the category 'woman'.

I used an ethnographic methodology that involved participants as contributors in the creation of new knowledge. Semi-structured interviews with 45 young university-educated Muslim women and 7 group discussions were used as initial data-gathering tools. The penultimate ethnographic stage involved Muslim women creating 3-minute long self-representational digital stories (DSTs), which consist of an autobiographical narrative accompanied by still pictures. This was a process of self-reflection for the women and an opportunity to take voice and to be heard. The subsequent screening of these DSTs to audiences who were not Muslim resulted in discussion and active debate about the reasons for prevalent (mis)understandings of Muslim women and stereotypes were challenged. In its initiation of more balanced representations of Muslim women this research empowers Muslim women, and by contributing to dialogue and cohesion it also empowers pluralist society as a whole.

This research clarifies the overlapping priorities and identities of young British Muslim women and initiates new discourses, as narrated by the women, on subjects including religious interpretation and practice, feminism, media representation and social cohesion. In the research findings I propose an evolving British-Muslim identity among Muslim youth (in this case young women) which is distinct from that of their parents; a theological articulation of a 'feminist' struggle for women's rights; and the need to engage with the media and others to create positive representations of Muslim women. Experiences with DSTs indicate the potential of personal narratives and interaction for the purposes of inter-community dialogue.

## Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in the thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of this thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed: .....

Date: 23 July 2010



## DEDICATION: Ayesha's voice

**On herself:** *"I am a student, I have a lot to experience in life and I am still young. So I have a lot to achieve and I have great ambitions and dreams. InshaAllah [if God wills] I can fulfil them."*

**On women's right:** *"I think they [rights] are very important. You lose your personality, your identity if you don't have rights. Identity is very important in this world."*

**On Patriarchy:** *"I think sometimes men... try to take these [women's] rights to make it easier for them. You know, if women don't have expectations, it becomes easier for them."*

**On Women fighting for their rights:** *"I want to convey to Muslim sisters whatever age they may be, whatever ethnicity, that Islam is not oppressing us, it gives us the opportunity to have our voice heard and to speak our mind. I have always been fighting for sisters, I have always had that thing, and I question sometimes. "Why do men get opportunities and women don't". Maybe there is a test in this and maybe there is another test that Allah has given us – to fight for our rights maybe."*

**On Dialogue:** *"It is good if we get to talk to each other, maybe then we will see why we behave in a particular manner. Maybe it will break the barrier and help build bridges [...] we are all human and if we communicate then there is a sense of security. [...] Even within Muslims we have gaps between different ethnicities. We need to fill these gaps and realise that we go through the same things in life. Any difficulties that we have, we should talk to each other. You know, a problem shared is a problem halved."*

**On the media:** *"In conclusion, from my point of view and from my experience, I feel that women with the hijab, the jilbab and even the niqab [various forms of covering used by Muslim women], I don't think that they are oppressed. I really want to get this point across that we are not oppressed or anything. It comes from our desires and belief that we want to do this for the sake of Allah. I hope to see this message portrayed in the media, maybe my speech will be there. I really hope that they can clear their minds that we are not oppressed."*

**Ayesha<sup>1</sup> participated in my research even though she was very ill because she felt it was important that she make her voice heard, if only, to clarify misconceptions about Islam. She died of cancer on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2009. She was 20.**

***May you be eternally blessed Ayesha, may your voice continue to be heard. Ameen***

---

<sup>1</sup> Ayesha is not her real name, but friends and family say she preferred using this name during the last few months of her life.



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## Note on terms, translations and transliterations

I use the terms God and Allah synonymously throughout this thesis. Like Mona Siddiqui (2007) I find it disconcerting that people of all faiths go to great lengths to attribute significance to one over the other. Although the feminist me (and the Muslim me) prefer the gender-neutral word 'Allah', for me both words Allah and God remain different names of the same being.

When referring to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) I have used both designations, 'the Prophet' and 'Prophet Muhammad'. When Muslims mention the name of any Prophet of God they always show respect and love by using the phrase 'peace be upon him' (pbuh). In accordance with this practice I usually append the acronym (pbuh) in parenthesis wherever I mention the name of a Prophet including Moses, Jesus or Muhammad (peace be upon them all). I refer to all companions of the Prophet (pbuh) and other Islamic personalities by the names by which they are commonly recognised; usually they are referred to by their first name. For ease of reading I do not append 'peace be upon him / her' or any similar phrase when referring to them although this is usual Muslim practice.

Translations of verses from the Quran, unless specifically mentioned are from Abdullah Yusuf Ali available at:

<http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/quran/>. All translations used are mentioned in the list of references as 'Holy Quran' followed by further details of publication. Translations of the Sunni *hadith* used, are available on same website: <http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/hadith/>.

Translations of participants' interviews, when used, are my own. As part of the research process, participants were given an opportunity to verify translations and amend them if need be.

For some words I have preferred to retain Islamic terms (normally Arabic, Urdu in a few cases) as English translations do not convey the complete meaning, for example the word *hijab* cannot be replaced with the English 'headscarf'<sup>2</sup>. Transliterations of words, unless specified otherwise, are based on common English usage as defined by the Oxford Dictionary of Islam, referred to as (Esposito 2003) in the text. Preferred meanings for transliterated Arabic or Urdu words are included in short in the main text (either in parenthesis or as a footnote) the first time they occur; detailed meanings are included in a glossary at the end of the thesis (Appendix L). I have not italicised words that are in regular usage including Quran, Allah; proper nouns including names of personalities; all other transliterated words are italicised.

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<sup>2</sup> See chapter 6 on Women's narratives of the *hijab*

# **Section I**

## **Why Give *Voice* to Muslim Women?**



## INTRODUCTION

### De-mystifying the *Muslimah*

---

#### I Contextualisation: ‘*De-mystifying the Muslimah*’<sup>1</sup>

In a perceived clash of civilisations (Huntington 1993), Islam and Muslims have been portrayed as the different other who needed to be civilised by western culture and education. The Muslim woman signified the backwardness of Islamic society and her emancipation was essential (Bullock 2003; Kahf 1999; Ahmed 1992). In contemporary western society, there are concerns about ‘Islamism’ – an interpretation of Islam with allegedly violent undertones. There are also concerns about the assertion of identity among many young Muslims (Bowlby & Liod-Evans 2009). Young British Muslim women are a topic for public and media debate in the UK (Dwyer and Shah 2009) and the resurgence of the *hijab*<sup>2</sup> in many western societies adds to modern suspicions of the other. Unfortunately, in some Muslim societies, patriarchy can cause the stereotypes to be true by denying Muslim women their social and personal rights.

In this research I take the standpoint that in all of the debates mentioned above, the Muslim woman’s version of events – her story – is neither told nor heard. Due to various sociological and historical conditions the Muslim woman has been marginalised from the processes that produced recorded and disseminated histories of Muslim women. In this research I seek to reinstate her as a storyteller who tells her own story. This research presents a complex and nuanced retelling of Muslim women’s realities as explored through an ethnographic methodology that is centred on giving Muslim women their voice.

#### (1) ‘*De-mystifying the Muslimah*’: the ‘-’ is Intentional

‘To demystify’ is to make (a subject) less difficult to understand.<sup>3</sup> When the ‘subject’ happens to be as complex as the *Muslimah* this definition becomes problematic. *Why* make her less difficult to understand? Can she be *made* less difficult to understand? A *Muslimah* adheres

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<sup>1</sup> A Muslim woman.

<sup>2</sup> Colloquially *hijab* may be understood as the headscarf that Muslim women wear. However it is more nuanced and refers to traditional Muslim women’s head, face, or body covering, of numerous varieties across time and space, often referred to as the “veil.” *hijab* is a symbol of modesty, privacy, and morality (Esposito 2003). Please see chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the *hijab*.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/demystify?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/demystify?view=uk)

to Islam, hence the label Muslim or *Muslimah*. But then she also has socio-cultural affiliations, each with its different interpretation and practice of Islam. Racial and ethnic diversity add to the heterogeneity. Then there is the matter of her choice and *how* she chooses to believe – her personal relationship with her faith.

The *Muslimness* of a Muslim woman has been sufficient for history to inscribe meanings upon her – a process in which she has had little or no say and which seldom takes into consideration diversities among Muslim women. Male colonialists described her as exotic and sensuous even though 18<sup>th</sup> century writer Lady Mary Wortley Montague reports that they may never have had access to Muslim women (Montagu 1716 - 1717). Patriarchy superimposed male honour upon the Muslim woman's personality; she had to be shielded from the corrupt world around her, so she was covered in the *chador aur char deewari* – the veil and the four walls, her domestic sphere. The proto-feminist pitied her, and wanted to rescue her from her 'inferior' culture (Lewis 1998). Modernity considered her religion archaic and that faith made her backward. The Muslim woman was the damsel in distress locked up in her cage waiting to be rescued by whoever was narrating the story – be it the orientalist, the colonialist, the feminist or the patriarch (Bullock 2003; Kahf 1999; Lewis 1996; Ahmed 1992; Said 1978).

More recently the polemic continues – Dilip Hiro in his contextualisation of immigration and race relations in Britain, describes 'ill-informed objections to the treatment of women in Islam' and 'ignorance and stereotyping about women's role in Islam [which] verged on the racist' (Hiro 1991: 190). Contemporary rhetoric about banning headscarves in Turkey,<sup>4</sup> face-veils in France<sup>5</sup> and in Britain<sup>6</sup> echo similar sentiments of either cloistered lives or of individuals who are anti-modern and anti-west<sup>7</sup>. Allawi (2009: 187) sums up the debate, he says, 'whenever gender issues are discussed, Islam's treatment of women becomes the other, unacceptable, alternative'.

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<sup>4</sup> BBC 2008a

<sup>5</sup> These are the French president Sarkozy's comments on the *burka* (long loose garment worn by women that covers the whole body), "We cannot accept to have in our country women who are prisoners behind netting, cut off from all social life, deprived of identity that is not the idea that the French republic has of women's dignity. The *burka* is not a sign of religion; it is a sign of subservience. It will not be welcome on the territory of the French republic" (BBC 2009a). See also Bowen 2007.

<sup>6</sup> BBC 2010a

<sup>7</sup> I had assumed that the erotic seductress image of the Muslim woman was a phenomenon of the past. However during my trawls of the internet, I realised that this image still persists (at least in some places!) much to the chagrin of many Muslim women. [www.Muslimahmediawatch.org](http://www.Muslimahmediawatch.org) is a website where a group of Muslim women discuss their opinions on various contemporary issues and keep an eye on the media. One article was about a 'boy-magazine's' list and pictures of the "10 hottest Muslim women"! The young women were clearly offended that such a list existed, one comment, "What makes this article so offensive to me in particular is the fact that they are fetishizing these women based upon a stereotype of Muslim women being seen and not heard" (*Muslimah Media Watch* 2009)



Polarised as either cruelly oppressed or wantonly promiscuous (Lewis 1996), the *Muslimah* becomes the mutely suffering representative of her faith and her culture. She was, and she is, the different other who is seldom asked about her views but who is often judged. An air of mystery and allure has developed around her. To mystify is to (1) utterly bewilder or (2) make obscure or mysterious.<sup>8</sup> It is this obscurity or mystery that surrounds Muslim women that this research hopes to de-mystify within the context of pluralist British society. This research does not set out to *make* Muslim women less mysterious, rather it presents a reading that acknowledges the complexities and diversity in the category 'Muslim women'. To *make* would be to impose another set of unsolicited meanings on the Muslim woman. Rather this research hopes to give voice to the Muslim woman, hear *her* and through *her* voice present new meanings and realities of being a Muslim woman. This work is, therefore, not an externally-controlled demystification of a mute subject which as a result of the researcher's efforts becomes easier to understand. Rather my research is a collaborative effort between Muslim women and others to challenge the accumulated mystery around Muslim women.

## (2) Why did I want to do this?

A research proposal can be the result of a flash of inspiration or a lifetime of study or perhaps both. For me this research is the continuation and culmination of an adult lifetime of reading. My own engagement with Islamic texts began when I converted<sup>9</sup> to Islam and had to *learn* my faith through reading and thinking. Then classifying my reading into experiential categories as I *lived* through what I read and thought through what I had lived. One of the first books about Islam that I read was a translation of the Holy Quran by early twentieth century British convert, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall. I read other translations and commentaries of the Quran<sup>10</sup> and then progressed to books on *ahadith*,<sup>11</sup> *sirah*,<sup>12</sup> *tarbbiyah*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/mystify?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/mystify?view=uk)

<sup>9</sup> Many Converts to Islam prefer the term Revert. This stems from the Islamic belief that God-consciousness is naturally inherent in all human beings and not just Muslims. This pertains to a conscious or unconscious recognition of the one common God of all humanity (and beyond) who is the Almighty Creator and Sustainer of the heavens, the earth and everything therein (See Holy Quran Chapter 1) and whom Muslims call Allah. Converts to Islam believe that when they convert to Islam they are reverting to their natural state of belief in Allah, hence their preference of the term Revert. In this research, when referring to people who have chosen to believe in Islam as opposed to having been born as Muslims, I shall use the term convert as it is more commonly understood.

<sup>10</sup> These included translations by Ahmed Raza Khan and Abdullah Yusuf Ali. Commentaries I read include those by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *Mawlana* Maududi and a partial reading of an English translation of Ibn Kathir's translation. The original text of the Quran remains verifiably unchanged, but the cultural milieux of translators and, even more so, commentators are invariably reflected in their translations and commentaries. These may be nuanced differences in meaning which can nevertheless affect the understandings of the non-Arabic speaker. I realise that my dependence on translations can be a weakness, one which I attempt to alleviate by reading as many different translations as possible. Arabic knowledge is a skill that I hope to develop post-doctorally.



and other areas of Islamic thought. My initiation to Islam was shaped by what I chose to read and my interpretations of what I read, rather than socio-cultural interpretations of Islam.

Gradually, I understood Islam to be an emancipatory faith that prescribed equality for all humanity irrespective of race, ethnicity, class or gender. Men and women were created out of the same soul.<sup>14</sup> As believers they have equal status with their Creator, they merit equal opportunity and reward from their Creator,<sup>15</sup> and in the domestic sphere they both have responsibilities to each other.<sup>16</sup> Historically there were many successful Muslim women who held positions of authority during the Prophet's (pbuh)<sup>17</sup> life-time. In later years there were *Muslimahs* who were scholars, poets, rulers, business women and who had various social roles (Nadwi 2007; Bewley 2004). My readings, as a convert and later when I was reading for this research, ratified the rights and status of women as described in foundational Muslim sources. However everything I read did not always agree with this view. There is a predominance of literature written by male scholars on women's subjects (Siddiqi 2004; Chaudhry 2003; Khan 1995; Engineer 1992; Maududi 1972) and fewer female scholars. Through the work of these scholars, I came to realise that the same religious doctrines that I interpreted as emancipatory, were sometimes interpreted differently based on cultural leanings of the author. These readings, not necessarily the most amenable to the rights of women had in some Muslim societies come to dominate over others.

My former career as an Human Resource (HR) professional in India, working in a 'glass' office made me a representative of my religious beliefs. My work positioned me at a confluence of people from different backgrounds, cultures and classes for whom I acted as a conduit, not just in a professional role as a corporate 'people's person', but also through personal relationships. Questions about Islam and the *hijab* I wore were unavoidable in conversations. I experienced the power of dialogue – questions about seemingly different ways of life soon gave way to discussions about similarities and working together. This was the beginning of my ideas – perhaps this was the effect of a Muslim woman speaking for herself.

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<sup>11</sup> Reports of the words and deeds of Muhammad and other early Muslims; considered an authoritative source of revelation, second only to the Quran (sometimes referred to as sayings of the Prophet). Singular: *hadith* (Esposito 2003)

<sup>12</sup> Literary genre that developed out of narrative histories of Muhammad's (pbuh) life and activities (Esposito 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Upbringing, education. In medieval Islam, a proper education for the upper classes included both religious and humanistic disciplines. In the contemporary world, refers to child rearing, education (usually secular), and pedagogy (Esposito 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Holy Quran, Chapter 4, Verses 1

<sup>15</sup> Holy Quran, Chapter 33, Verses 3

<sup>16</sup> Last Sermon given by the Prophet (pbuh) (al-Mubarakpuri 1995: 463 - 465)

<sup>17</sup> Peace be upon him

### (3) Three-way Disconnections and an Untold Story

There were disconnections between how I understood my faith and what is practiced in some Muslim communities. Forgotten memories were remembered and they strengthened my resolve to this research – my brilliant classmate in school who wanted to be a cardiologist but who got married instead. She is happy, but could things have been different, did she want them to be different? ..... I never asked her. The alleged banning of education for women and girls by the Afghan Taliban was termed Islamic, but the first revelation in the Quran was a command to all humankind to read.<sup>18</sup> Were the Afghani women asked? This did not add up. Socio-political studies and research indicate that Muslim women lag behind their counterparts from other communities in education as well as in the workplace, implying lesser participation in society.

- The World Economic Forum report (2005) shows that countries with majority Muslim populations rank lowest in women's empowerment indicating that women in these countries have the lowest levels of economic participation and opportunity, political empowerment and educational attainment.
- The Sachar report (Sachar, 2006) initiated by the government of India is a high profile investigation into the status of Muslims in India. Its findings show that Muslim women have much lower literacy levels as compared to women from other religious backgrounds. The report goes on to illustrate how this disparity in the educational achievements of Muslim women influences their careers, health, lives and futures.
- In the UK, studies reflect similar disparities. Social Trends (2006) informs us that Muslim women have the highest level of economic inactivity at 69% compared to between 25% and 36% for women belonging to other faith groups or for those who have no religion.

Statistics seem to indicate a discrepancy between the divinely ordained rights of (Muslim) women and their social reality (Bewley 1999; Pickthall 1926). Although Islam is an emancipatory faith, disparities exist between different interpretations of Islamic theology, not all of which give women their rights.

This did not mean that the stereotypes of Islam as a misogynist social-order were true (Nadwi 2007: xii). Richardson writes about seven narratives that determine how Islam and Muslims are perceived in the West, which inform media representations of Muslims. Among the seven narratives, he includes a perspective of Islam as a religion that systematically discriminates against women (Richardson 2007: 4). My study of Islam, my lived experiences and the lived experiences of many Muslim women, indicate a different story – that of Muslim

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<sup>18</sup> Holy Quran, Chapter 4, Verses 1- "Proclaim! (or read!) in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created-". Marmaduke Pickthall translates as "Read: In the name of thy Lord Who createth [...]"



women who practice their faith in secular society, balancing the two. There are Muslim women who are denied their rights but there is also evidence of Muslim women who enjoy them (Bullock 2005; Ahmad 2001) and of Muslim women who are using their agency to garner rights for other women (Bewley 1999, Ahmed 1992, Al Farūqi 1991). These Muslim women are under-represented and misrepresented by stereotypes that portray them as either the 'different exotic other' or the 'oppressed and subjugated victim' (Haddad *et al* 2006; Bullock 2003; Wilson 2003).

This was a three-way disconnection: between Islam as an emancipatory faith, patriarchy's denial of Muslim women's rights and pluralist society's obsession with blinkered stereotypes of Muslim women seeing them only as subjugated victims. Patriarchy on the one hand and secular/modern versus the religious/traditional debates on the other, in both cases the Muslim woman's opinion was not sought. She is neither asked how she wants to practise her faith, nor is she asked whether it oppresses her. Her story is left untold, her voice remains unheard.

#### **(4) Inspiration - *Where was the Muslimah's Story?***

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), the Nigerian novelist, speaks about the dangers of the single story which may be true, but which is nevertheless one-sided – it creates an incomplete picture, which can be unfair because of its incompleteness. The storytellers and contents of the stories they tell are often determined by relations of power and authority in societies. Authority decides who the storyteller is, who the story is about, what story is told and how it is told. It is dominant social authority that ultimately decides what the definitive story of a person or group is (Adichie 2009). This research is also inspired by the reading, vision and professional passions of my supervisor Dr. Alison Scott-Baumann. As a philosopher who reads Ricoeur she writes, 'When habitus,<sup>19</sup> relies too heavily upon defining as evil the less privileged one of a pair, we are faced with societal self-deception' (Scott-Baumann 2009: 158).

The stories being told about Muslim women are being told by others on their own terms. Le Doeuff (1998) describes the historical process of marginalisation of women from institutions of knowledge that became hegemonies of male scholarship and authority. The woman's authority to tell her story was usurped in favour of *his*-story. The silencing of the Muslim woman's voice is perhaps a part of this almost universal marginalisation of women's voices. Patriarchy took away her voice. The colonialist in his endeavour to colonise foreign lands justified his imperialist aims by portraying these lands as inhabited by barbaric people who needed to be civilised by western culture – women particularly needed to be helped (Ahmed

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<sup>19</sup> Defined as the acquired habitual patterns of thought, behaviour and taste of any community (Scott-Baumann, 2009: 158)

1992). Only one story about Muslim women was told and it sustained imageries of oppression (Kahf 1999). My inspiration for this research project began here: I wanted to reinstate the Muslim woman as a storyteller to tell her own story and hence empower pluralist society. Although my reflective journey through the literature began much earlier *this* was the point of embarkation for this research, that is *by, for and with* Muslim women.

## II Conceptualisation: a Plan Develops - 'Exploring Perceptions of Young Muslim Women in Britain'

### (1) Young Muslim Women in Britain

I was passionate about this idea – collaborative research to clarify the diverse realities of Muslim women's lives. Such reclamation of Muslim women's stories is leading to a genre of Muslim woman scholarship including exegetical studies of Muslim religious scripture (Bakhtiar 2007; Barlas 2002; Wadud-Muhsin 1992); pedagogies to empower Muslim women (Barazangi 2004); explorations of religious and historical roles of Muslim women (Bewley, 2004); Muslim women sociological studies (Bullock 2003; Ahmad 2001); Muslim women geographies (Falah & Nagel 2005) and the feminisms of Muslim women (Badran 2008, 2005, 2002; Ali 2000; Moghissi 1999; Al Farūqi 1991).

I decided the focus for my research was to give voice to young Muslim women in Britain. The British Muslim diaspora in many ways reflects the cultural and ethnic diversity that is found in the entire Muslim *Ummah*.<sup>20</sup> South Asian Muslims from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh constitute nearly two-thirds of the British Muslim population (Peach 2005; Hiro 1991). There are also sizeable African, Arab, South-east Asian and convert communities. Reddie (2009) for example writes about the Black Muslim community in Britain and specifically explores the growing number of young Black converts to Islam.

### (2) The Visible Muslim woman

In a post 9/11, Afghan-war and Iraq-war world, Muslims everywhere, and in Britain are increasingly faced with so-called 'Islamophobia'.<sup>21</sup> They must constantly negotiate and

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<sup>20</sup> Muslim community. A fundamental concept in Islam, expressing the essential unity and theoretical equality of Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings. In the Quran, designates people to whom God has sent a prophet or people who are objects of a divine plan of salvation (Esposito 2003). Tariq Ramadan describes the *Ummah* as a "community of Faith, of feeling, of brotherhood, of destiny" (Ramadan, 1999 p.158); a kinship of people devoted to the worship of their common Creator. Bari (2005) describes how this concept of universal nationhood or the *Ummah* influences the identity positions of Muslims.

<sup>21</sup> Islamophobia understood as 'unfounded hostility towards Islam' (Runnymede 1997:4) is a contentious word. The authors of *Islamophobia Issues, Challenges and Action* feel that, 'It may be more apt to speak of 'Islamophobias' rather than of a single phenomenon. Each



renegotiate, harmonise and clarify their loyalties and identity positions within increasingly polarised social frameworks that question the very Muslimness of Muslims and which perpetuate antagonistic representations of Muslims and their faith practices. In these contexts their *hijabs* make some Muslim women particularly visible (Tarlo 2010; Karim 2006; Ameli 2002).

It is important to interrogate what determines this *visibility* of some Muslim women and why some women were more visible than others. The simple answer would be their *hijabs*. The comprehensive answer would contextualise the inscribed meanings that the *hijab* holds for the women who wear it and the people who perceive it – the ‘baggage’ that the *hijab* carries. John Bowen (2007) in his research on French attitudes to Muslim head scarves makes a distinction between *pratiquants* who are ‘practising’ Muslims and *croyants* who are ‘believing’ Muslims (p. 195). A *croyant* may fast and eat only *halal* meat, but does not regularly pray (195). *Pratiquants* regularly prayed and *pratiquant* women normally wore *hijabs* (p. 71). He also adds that ‘designating someone as a *pratiquant* can carry with it tones of fanaticism’ (p. 195) due to media imagery inscribed upon Islamic belief and practices, which is why some Muslims are more visible than others.

I agree with this distinction that Bowen makes, but add the caveat that both terms are ambiguous and trying to define either term is exceedingly problematic, for example I have met Muslim women who do not wear the *hijab* but who may be described as *pratiquants*. The term ‘believing’ is indeed often used in religious texts to describe individuals who believe – for example the Quran often addresses Muslims as “Oh! believing men and women”. I have observed (in India and in Britain) the word ‘practising’ being frequently used in conversations to describe individuals who are firm adherents of Islamic faith practices, so bearded men and women who wear *hijabs*, who pray regularly, are often described as practising by their peers. Although usage of the term ‘practising’ seems socially acceptable, philosophical problems remain. What is the extent of either ‘belief’ or ‘practice’? What do they constitute? When does ‘believing’ become ‘practising’? I disagree that outward appearances are sufficient to delineate between the two. The difference between ‘believing’ and ‘practising’ is simultaneously more nuanced, complex and subtle. Culture and social contexts of believers add to this complexity.

One starting point for this discourse is a verse from the Holy Quran which foretells ‘a great reward’ for Muslim men and women who are believing, devout, true, patient, constant, humble, who give to charity, who fast, who guard their chastity and who engage in constant

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version of Islamophobia has its own features as well as similarities with, and borrowings from, other versions’. It is a new name for an old fear because ‘hostility towards Islam and Muslims has been a feature of European societies since the eighth century of the common era. It has taken different forms at different times and has fulfilled a variety of functions (Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia 2004: 7)

worship of their Creator.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps practice constitutes belief and all of the other virtues listed in the verse. This is an important discussion that also needs to incorporate contemporary discourses of rationality and the secular-religious dialectic.

The believing-practising distinction is replete with unanswerable questions; nevertheless it provides a framework to explore visibility – perception, portrayal and representation – of Muslims and Muslim women. For Muslims in Britain the category ‘visible’ is as problematic, in addition to Islamic practices including *hijab*, visibility is also caused by racial, cultural and lingual differences, historical contexts of colonisation and integration versus assimilation debates. As a researcher this is difficult, I need to define my research sample as it determines my conclusions, but the categories that may be used to define this sample are porous, overlapping and cannot be rigidly defined. Although I am aware of this porosity of the categories, I realise I give voice to visible Muslim women (Tarlo, 2010) – Bowen’s *pratiqants* (2007) who whether or not wear the *hijab*, are recognisable as adherents to Islam and who are most vilified and stereotyped (Bowlby & Liod-Evans 2009: 47).

### **(3) Research Objectives - Reinstating Muslim women as Storytellers**

This research began as an idea to deconstruct the realities of Muslim women as portrayed by stereotypes and evolve representations that were articulated by Muslim women themselves. I wanted to ‘give voice to Muslim women’ – a phrase that I will repeat often during this thesis. They needed representation that could contest popular media imagery of the oppressed-subjugated Muslim woman. In the British context it was important to explore the layered identities and multifaceted contributions that Muslim women are making, and can be encouraged to make, within pluralist society. The research objectives as well as methodological choices reflect my overarching goal for this research to be an articulation that is *by* and *for* Muslim women – for Muslim women to be storytellers again and for them to tell their *own* stories. This brings me to the specific **research objectives** that I envisaged for this research.

1. To explore, through a series of narrative interviews, the perceptions of young Muslim women of their identity, rights, aspirations and opinions.
2. To understand how young Muslim women are perceived in the media, academic literature and in communities other than their own within Britain.
3. To examine the use of Digital Storytelling (DST) as a narrative tool to encourage women to tell stories that challenge media stereotypes and which represent the identity of young Muslim women to audiences from outside their own community in order to develop alternative perceptions.

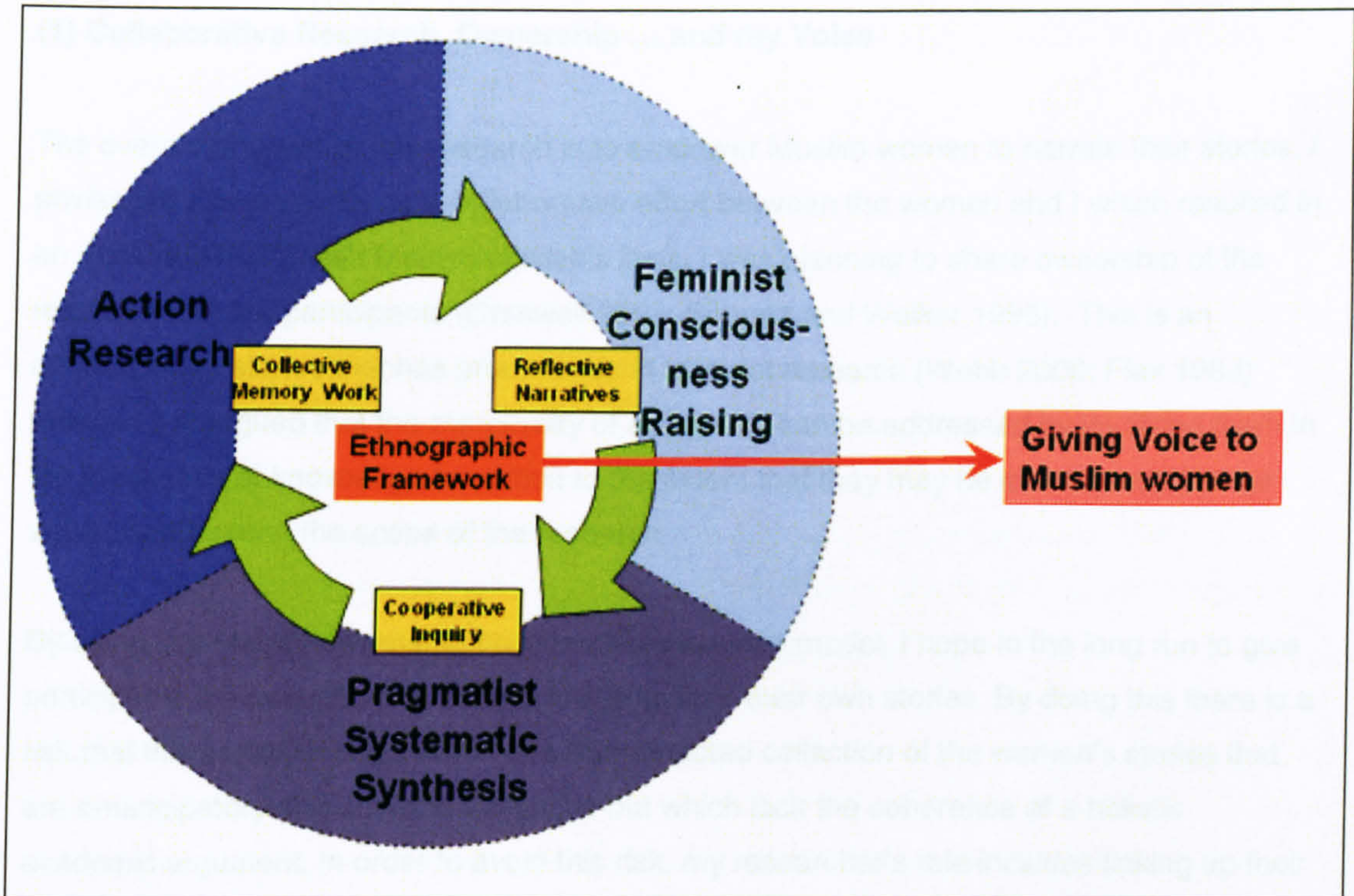
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<sup>22</sup> Holy Quran Chapter 35, Verse 33



4. To suggest a process that would empower Muslim women to voice their opinions and enable them to make positive contributions which are relevant to their lives – their role within the Muslim community and fostering inter-community understanding.

**Figure 1: Pragmatist-Feminist Methodology**



I worked within a feminist-pragmatist ontological stance (explained in chapter two) to empower participants to be collaborative partners rather than passive subjects in the research process – their experiences and meanings were central to the research process. In its attempt to initiate perceptible changes, the methodology also involved an element of action research – in the final two stages of the research, Muslim women created 3-min long self-representational digital stories (DSTs) consisting of an autobiographical narrative accompanied by still pictures, which were screened to audiences from different cultural backgrounds. This resulted in dialogue which altered audiences' perceptions of Muslim women.

### III Discursive Threads & the Process of De-mystification

As I progressed through the research I realised that there were discursive threads that wove in and out of the research process enabling its flow and often resurfacing during the thesis, some more often than others. Some of these threads – ontological stances, research methods or sociological concepts – evolved as the research progressed; others informed key



aspects of the thesis; and some others are part of my meta-narrative voice that holds different sections of this research together. In this section I will present short vignettes of these various threads, so as to introduce the reader to them. In the Conclusion I will pick up these threads again to reflect upon how my understandings of these 'threads' evolved as a result of the research.

### **(1) Collaborative Research, Ownership ... and my Voice**

The overarching aim of this research is to empower Muslim women to narrate their stories. I envisaged this research as a collaborative effort between the women and I which resulted in an exploration of British Muslim women's lives. I was planning to share ownership of the research with the participants (Creswell 2003; Schratz and Walker 1995). This is an emancipatory stance that has precedence in feminist research (Webb 2000; Flax 1983) wherein it is argued that the marginality of any group can be addressed by involving them in the processes of knowledge formation to the extent that they may be able to sustain their voice even beyond the scope of the research.

By using this shared ownership-collaborative research model, I hope in the long run to give participants the confidence to author and articulate their own stories. By doing this there is a risk that this research could result in a disconnected collection of the women's stories that are emancipatory and artistically creative but which lack the coherence of a holistic academic argument. In order to avoid this risk, my researcher's role includes linking up their stories within the frameworks of this research and also mediating between many realities – that of my participants and that of my readers. To enable the women to become storytellers, I had to be one too.

### **(2) ... and my Auto-ethnographic Voice**

This leads to the auto-ethnographic genre of writing. Criticisms of auto-ethnography accuse it of narcissism – it may result in an egoistic tale of self-importance (Holt 2003). However, my experiences as a Muslim woman living in multicultural environments immediately became pertinent to this research – informing and shaping its progress. Collaborative frameworks meant that ownership was shared, so as a Muslim woman I was researcher and researched at the same time. My story becomes part of the research story and my voice becomes a framework holding the structure together – a meta-narrative that connects the various other stories. This stance blurs the line between researcher and researched – not only am I a reflexive researcher I am also the researched.

Also which 'hat' do I wear for this research? I am many different people. Born a Roman Catholic, I have experienced the same prejudices about Islam and Muslim women that I now



seek to defend – I was an outsider. As a Muslim woman, who wears a *hijab* and prays five times a day, a '*pratiquant*' – I am an insider. Sometimes I find myself between these two positions, I critique the plurality of pluralist society, I question authenticity of cultural patriarchy in (Muslim) societies; and I seek more knowledge in order to be me – I am an academic researcher who believes. I realise that my many voices – convert,<sup>23</sup> *Muslimah*, human resource professional, academic, romantic poet and my family roles as daughter, sister and wife will affect the way I narrate my existence, just as it would for any woman – Muslim or non-Muslim.

### **(3) Participants' Voices**

I have spoken to over 45 young Muslim women for this research – all of them were *croyants*, believing Muslims and many of them *pratiquants*, practising Muslims. Contrary to media discourse that presents a homogenous construct of Muslim women, this was a heterogeneous group. Women had different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, nationality, levels of education, careers and indeed perceptions of what emancipation is. Their voices will be integrated in all sections of this research, both intrinsically as the underpinnings of arguments being put forward and as excerpts from women's interviews.

### **(4) Inter-disciplinary Research**

The diversity among Muslim women is reflected in the sample of women I spoke to. Their narratives are rich and varied – a reflection of their diverse lived experiences which I may not have been able to represent by working within any single academic discipline. There is an argument within feminist research that rigid academic disciplines cannot do justice to the experiences of marginalised groups because they cannot address the specifics of marginalised existence (Purvis 1995). My research takes an inter-disciplinary approach because it is a conduit between various academic disciplines that are relevant to the core objective of giving voice to Muslim women – gender studies, theology and religious studies, sociology and media studies. It presents more-rounded exegesis of the life, ways and being of Muslim women, which contextualises them as fully involved contributors to pluralist society and who *inspire* and are *inspired* by a variety of texts and rhetoric.

In figure 2 the three circles represent the three main academic disciplines within which I position this research. The black arrows mark the potential synergies that may be possible when academic disciplines overlap. For example, when feminist studies and theology engage with each other, new women-friendly interpretations of faith may become possible. A

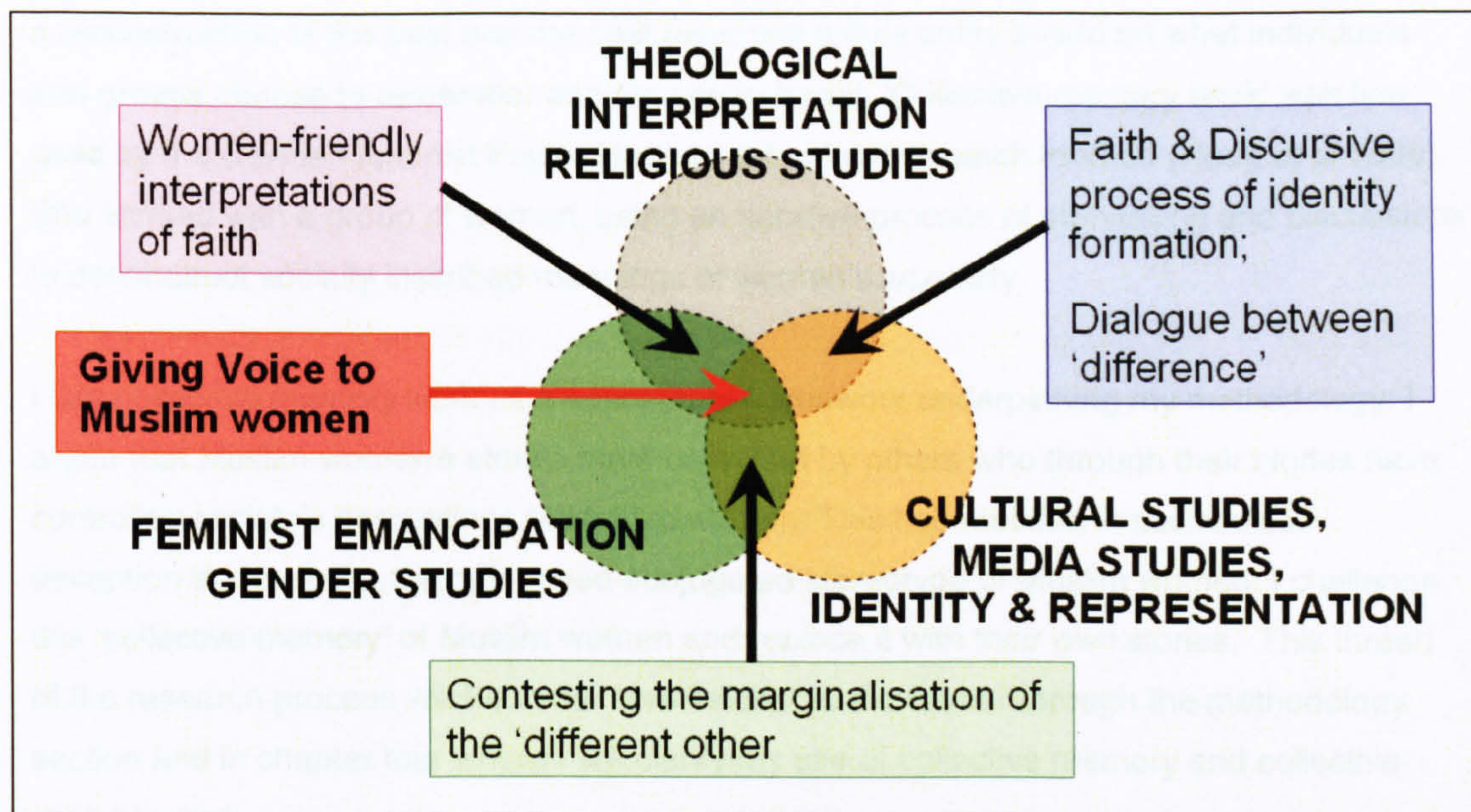
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<sup>23</sup> I was an outsider, I am now an insider - Poston describes this transformation in the standpoint of a convert. He writes, "With respect to the role of women in Islam, three groups may be distinguished: "outsiders looking in", "insiders looking out" and "converts to Islam looking around and back" (Poston 2001: 1)



friend and colleague who is doing a PhD on mathematical modelling describes what he calls hybrid models of enquiry, which he says is the thrust of research in bio-physical sciences. In my research a hybrid model helped contextualise the diversity of British Muslim women's experiences, contributions and aspirations in pluralist society

**Figure 2: Hybrid Models of Enquiry**



### (5) Feminist Discourse

When I began this research, like many other women – Muslim and non-Muslim – I was suspicious of feminism. Gradually, as I explored the texts, I came across aspects of feminism that I agreed with. I was particularly impressed by feminist methodologies that used methods that were consciousness-raising, self-reflective and which empowered the researched to be part of the research process. My interest in the methods led me to explore the theory that informed these methods. After much reading, some disagreements remain which I explore later, however I also see the potential within feminism and feminist methods to give voice to Muslim women. I realise that there are many feminisms within which I have found my own feminist stance, 'to give voice to any marginalised group and not just women'.

In order to effectively address Muslim women's issues I believe that synergies between feminist thought and Islamic belief are important. This requires mutual challenging of one's prejudices about the other – not all feminisms are anti-religion and not all religious women are oppressed. Such an approach could contextualise Muslim women's beliefs into their struggles for rights. I shall unravel and develop this 'feminism' thread as I explore the literature, my methods and in my discussions of Muslim women's voices.



## (6) Collective Memory Work

Maurice Halbwachs wrote about collective memory in 1941: he explored the relationships between individuals and their loyalties to various groups. He postulated that individuals' thoughts and actions were influenced by the consciousness of the group/s they were loyal to which in turn are influenced by individuals' memories of the past. The present thus becomes a reconstruction of the past and the past becomes a fluid entity based on what individuals and groups choose to remember and choose to forget. 'Collective memory work' was first used by the German feminist Frigga Haug as a feminist research method (Haug *et al* 1999). She worked with a group of women, using an iterative process of storytelling and discussions to deconstruct socially inscribed meanings of women's sexuality.

I use collective memory work as a conceptual framework underpinning my methodology. I argue that Muslim women's stories have been told by others who through their stories have controlled society's perceptions of Muslim women. This has resulted in societal self-deception and belief in the oppressed-subjugated stereotype of Muslim women. I challenge this 'collective memory' of Muslim women and replace it with their *own* stories. This thread of the research process will become more evident to the reader through the methodology section and in chapter four where I will clarify my use of collective memory and collective memory work.

## (7) Authenticity and Authority

This research raises many questions about authority, authenticity and who has the right to claim these epithets for themselves. These are a few examples:

- (1) Muslim women have begun a process of reclaiming their faith. 'Women-friendly' interpretations of the Quran and *Sunnah*<sup>24</sup> by women and men are challenging the authority and authenticity of extant patriarchal understandings. Bakhtiar (2007) has completed the first translation of the Quran into English by a woman. In her work she challenges many patriarchal givens (Bakhtiar 2007). Other scholars (female and male) explore specific subjects within Quranic hermeneutics (Wadud-Muhsin 1992; Barlas 2002; Barazangi 2004); *hadith* studies (Khattab 2007) or Islamic history (Bewley 2004; Nadvi 2007). The authenticity of all these scholars and their work *can be and is* often challenged. This is an issue that I know I will have to grapple with

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<sup>24</sup> Established custom, normative precedent, conduct, and cumulative tradition, typically based on Muhammad's example. The actions and sayings of Muhammad are believed to complement the divinely revealed message of the Quran, constituting a source for establishing norms for Muslim conduct and making it a primary source of Islamic law (Esposito 2010)

throughout the duration of this research project. Who has the authority to undertake religious interpretation?

- (2) Many Muslims say they are rejecting non-religious cultural practices prevalent within Muslim societies in order to achieve authentic Islam. What is authentic Islam?<sup>25</sup>
- (3) Earlier I mentioned dominant social power controlling the telling and content of stories – the less privileged of a pair of two is portrayed as evil. I want to give Muslim women a voice, but the question remains – who has the authority to tell an authentic story?
- (4) Finally this research is positioned at a postulated permeable membrane between different communities within a society. It envisages a space where Muslim women may tell their stories, but these stories must be heard and understood by diverse audiences. One last rhetorical question: what meaning will the women's narratives have for audiences who subscribe to value-systems different from those of Muslim women?
  - Will the patriarchal listener reject women's narratives as unauthentic 'feminist' interpretations?
  - Will the feminist listener reject them because they are Islamic?
  - Will the secular listener reject religious authority?
  - And will the naïve listener simply be flummoxed?

#### **IV Structure - Implementing the Plan**

To end this Introduction, I introduce the reader to the structure of this thesis. The collaborative research model I used and collective memory work both require this thesis to engage with the voices of Muslim women – it had to be their voice, albeit through my lens.

- Section One maps the boundaries and clarifies the objectives for this research project. It includes this 'Introduction' and chapter one within which various strands of literature relevant to this research are explored and critiqued. This section will clarify the reasons why Muslim women should be given voice.
- Section Two charts out the methodology which will be used in this research and includes two chapters. Chapter two will describe the theoretical reasoning for the epistemological and methodological choices that underpin this research. Chapter three marries this theory to practical experiences on the field during ethnographic

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<sup>25</sup> I discuss how authentic Islam can mean be construed differently by different Muslims.



work. Together these chapters will clarify how this research sets out to give voice to Muslim women.

- Section Three will present a discussion of the research findings from my ethnographic work with Muslim women. Chapter four in this section introduces my use of collective memory work to conceptualise recurring themes used in this section. In chapters five to eight Muslim women's opinions will be juxtaposed with relevant literature to present a rounded discussion on subjects that the women felt were important to discuss. I call this the Voices section.
- Section Four will primarily focus on Digital Storytelling and the potential of personal stories to de-mystify. Chapter nine discusses the rationale and the process of creating a digital story. Chapter ten explores the potential of digital storytelling to empower the storyteller and the listener in different ways. In this chapter I explore the possibilities that Muslim women's voices have to further inter-community dialogue. In this section I will attempt to answer the question what may be achieved when Muslim women take voice and this voice is heard.
- Section Five consists of the Conclusion. I do not see it as the definitive-end rather it concludes this phase of research. It will highlight the outcomes of this research project and set the direction for further research with Muslim women. In this sense it will be a new beginning.

When I began this research, I set out to give voice to Muslim women. It has given me personal insight to focus my mind on something that I am so passionate about. My journey over the last three years has been extremely fulfilling - personally, intellectually, academically and spiritually. On the way I discovered new facets of my own identity as a Muslim woman. I would like to invite you the reader to experience this journey which I undertook. Through the voices of the young women who participated in this research, and through my researcher's lens I sincerely hope to initiate alternate understandings of Muslim women. I hope for their story to be told.



## CHAPTER 1

## Setting the Context: Proxy Voices and the Voice of the Muslim woman

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### 1.1 Mapping the Literature and Identifying my Focus

In the previous chapter I briefly described my initial readings as a convert to Islam which informed my ontological stances as a believer and as an academic researcher. In this chapter, I shall describe the onward and ongoing literary journey that this research project has followed to decode and dissect extant understandings and representations of Muslim women. Through review, interrogation and critique of the literature, and occasionally challenging established standpoints and respected voices, this chapter will outline the gap in existing knowledge that my research intends to fill.

In the last chapter I briefly described my conversion to Islam and subsequent discovery of Islam as a religion, *din* and cultural practice<sup>1</sup> of 1.63 billion people in the world (Factbook 2009). Islam is portrayed in popular literature as a monolithic whole – a religion that is either ‘the different suspicious other’ or a ‘divinely revealed way-of-life’ depending on whom you read. My initial survey of the literature made me recognise the heterogeneity within Islam. There are various *halal*<sup>2</sup> ways to interpret the same Islamic injunctions, but there are also contradictions between the practice of Muslims and the scriptural revelations that they adhere to. Muslim women are marginalised by patriarchy in some Muslim communities that deny them their divinely-ordained rights.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand Muslim women are also marginalised by westernised/orientalist views that ‘other’ and eroticise them. I had one overarching objective for this research – to bring Muslim women’s voices into these discourses.

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<sup>1</sup> Muslims understand Islam to be more than a religion that is limited to one’s personal life. Rather it is a *din*, a way-of-life (Esposito 2003) which influences every aspect of life - personal, social and professional. Devout Muslims often do not draw distinctions between religious practice in the social and personal spheres. I consciously differentiate between Islam as a faith, *din* and culture

<sup>2</sup> Quranic term used to indicate what is lawful or permitted (Esposito 2003). Here I refer to *halal* or permissible interpretations of faith.

<sup>3</sup> As laid-out in the Quran and the ahadith.



### 1.1.2 Literature Strands

The complexities involved in giving voice to Muslim women required me to explore various strands of literature that in different ways influence either Muslim women's lives, their representations or both. Religion is important to many Muslim women, who choose to lead their lives according to Islamic ideals which they draw from foundational Islamic texts and interpretations of these texts. Throughout this research I will refer to and critique interpretations of Islamic texts that are relevant and important to Muslim women's religious practice. This constitutes what may be described as the theology strand to this research. I will also draw strongly from feminist literature which urges an emancipatory giving of voice to any marginalised group – male or female. Perceptions of Muslim women as structured by the media, popular literature and Orientalism – defined as an outlook or *épistémé* (Rodinson 2002: 85) that pervades and shapes views, perspectives, and understandings of the Orient (Said 1978) – will also contribute to this literature review.

As a Muslim woman I see this research as an opportunity to clarify Islamic stand-points about women according to foundational texts. As a pragmatist I see this research as a contribution to new knowledge that recognises the experiences of Muslim women. As a feminist I believe this research gives voice to a heretofore marginalised group within the sisterhood – Muslim women, whose struggles must be iterated within new definitions of feminist arguments that contextualise the Islamic faith of these *sisters*. As part of pluralist society I see this as an opportunity for intercommunity dialogue and social cohesion. As an academic I will begin by exploring and interrogating the dominant voices that write about Muslim women.

## 1.2 Meeting the Dominant Voices

There is a plethora of literature that is relevant to social constructs of the Muslim woman – 200 years of western scholarly and political writing about Muslim women and centuries of theological writing by Muslim scholars and writers, ever since Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) delivered the message of Islam in Arabia over 1400 years ago. It is not possible within the confines of time-bound academic research to fully explore all this writing. Here I delve into sections of this literature that enable me to frame the arguments that I make and contextualise my research objectives.

The Muslim woman's story is represented by many voices – the Muslim male scholar, the feminist, the colonial Orientalist, the media and by Muslim women themselves. Often the former voices do not fully grasp the *Muslimah's* dual challenge of being both a woman *and* a Muslim. The question of authority and authenticity of *all* these voices is debatable – which of



them have the 'authority to be authentic'? These different voices, authentic or not, create an othering of Muslim women, with one stereotype often strengthening the negative images created by the other. To give structure to this section, to clarify the stances of various writers and to create opportunities for the various stances to engage with each other; I have tried to classify existing literature under the following strands or themes:

- Male scholars: Patriarchal perspectives
- Male scholars: Emancipatory standpoints
- Muslim women
- Orientalist commentaries
- 'Airport' literature
- Feminist texts

Given the complexity of the area and the sensitivities involved it is not possible to create a perfect classification for these arguments that often overlap or fit into more than one 'category', for example I have chosen to discuss Leila Ahmed's work within the section on Muslim women, whereas Katherine Bullock in her research on the *hijab* includes Leila Ahmed's book in a list of what she describes as liberal feminist writings. Similarly among Muslim male scholars there are voices from a wide spectrum – those that articulate interpretations of Islam that are oppressive towards women as well as male scholars, whom I include in a separate category, who from an Islamic theological perspective argue for rights and emancipation for women.

This ambiguity in my attempt to 'classify' dominant voices on Muslim women is a product of the heterogeneity within the Muslim *Ummah* and the different standpoints that are possible within Islamic thought. Literature about Muslim women is invariably underpinned by culture, socio-political environment (and tensions), historical associations and personal opinions (of authors, their societies and the women they write about) as part of the story that is being told to the reader. While acknowledging the limitations that come with labelling, my classification attempts to create a logical framework within which I and the reader can navigate through this maze of inter-weaving and overlapping standpoints, themes, ideas and creative tensions that prevail in extant literature and engage with the different genres of writing, and their implications for the women whose stories they claim to tell.

### **1.2.1 Male Scholars: Patriarchal Perspectives**

Islamic bookshops usually have a section on Muslim women – books for and about them. A quick perusal of the shelves indicates that many authors are men, scholars of various denominational affiliations, pedigree and skill levels (Abdul Qadir 2006; Siddiqi 2004; Ansari *et al* 2003; Chaudhry 2003; Al-Hashimi 1996; Al-Musnad 1996; Khan 1995; Al-Utheimeen



1994; Engineer 1992; Maududi 1972;). During my reading for this research and earlier, this dominance of the male voice was always a slightly frustrating experience. Michèle Le Doeuff in *The Sex of Knowing* (1998) describes how women's voices are displaced from mainstream discourses by dominant male voices, who gradually monopolised knowledge-formation processes and subsequent dissemination of new knowledge, marginalising not just women's voices but also their opinions. Is there a similar argument for the paucity of books on Muslim women written by Muslim women? Mohammad Akram Nadwi's (2007) work about the women scholars of Islam (also Bewley 1999, 2004)<sup>4</sup> provides evidence of the position of public authority that female scholars enjoyed in Islamic societies of the past. So when and why did Muslim women leave the annals of scholarly pursuit? These are issues that need to be the subject of future research;<sup>5</sup> equally important is an exploration of the enduring influence of such literature on Muslim communities.

These books discuss various themes of a Muslim woman's life including biographical accounts of prominent Muslim women, religious rulings pertinent to women and social reform. Some literature (Ansari *et al*/2003; Abdul Qadir 2006) are similar to Bewley's and Nadwi's work in that they present biographical accounts of prominent Muslim women who lived during Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) lifetime including his wives, daughters and the *Sahabiya*,<sup>6</sup> and other female personalities from Islamic history. While these use the same tools – the lives of prominent Muslim women personalities – often their objectives in telling the reader these stories vary considerably. Some present the reader with commentaries on these women's lives which clarify the emancipatory effect of Islam on the lives of women through history, during the lifetime of the Prophet (pbuh) and beyond. These women often had very public roles and were business women, scholars, teachers and even warriors. Other writers like Abdul Qadir (2006) handle the same biographical narratives very differently. Their narratives are underpinned by a notional suggestion to readers that women must lead a sheltered life. Such literature tends to 'focus on the spiritual status of women' rather than 'their religious, literary and moral achievements' (Ansari *et al*/2003: 15).

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<sup>4</sup> Both Bewley and Nadwi present readings of early Muslim women's lives which focus on the emancipatory effect that Islam had on the lives of these women, empowering them to contribute to the societies they lived in, in various ways.

<sup>5</sup> This research is designed to partially address this gap in the literature by contextualising the voice of Muslim women. There is need for further research into the specific reasons for this gap - "when and why did Muslim women leave the annals of scholarly pursuit?" While it is not within the scope of this research to fully answer this question, the arguments that it presents through following chapters will move the debate on Muslim women's rights and their voices further, and will set the context for future research. This research will not actively seek to explore the historical (and other) reasons why Muslim women's voices were sidelined, however it will create a space for Muslim women's voices to be heard and contextualised into the dominant discourses from which they have been sidelined.

<sup>6</sup> Female Companions who lived during the lifetime of the Prophet (s.a.w)



The suggestion of a sheltered life for women is encapsulated in '*Behisti Zewar*' a book written in Urdu by *Mawlana*<sup>7</sup> Ashraf Ali Thanvi in the early 1900s<sup>8</sup> as a means to acquaint women with Islamic knowledge. This book is significant within South Asian (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) Muslim communities which in Britain form two-thirds of the Muslim population.<sup>9</sup> It presents a condescending encyclopaedic account of Islamic history, laws, rules and regulations, directed exclusively to female readers. It also deals with various *Mas'ala* (routine problems/matters) and their solutions. It is criticised for its very pedantic details about various *Mas'ala*, prescription of the *niqab* (face covering) for all young women and furthering of a social role that limits women to the domestic sphere.

The book '*Purdah*<sup>10</sup> and the Status of Woman' by the Pakistani scholar Abula'la Maududi (1972), similarly prescribes a limited and narrow role for Muslim women based on the author's interpretations of foundational Islamic texts. *Mawlana* Maududi is a highly respected scholar and I have been, in the past, particularly impressed by his commentary on the Holy Quran. When I first read his work on the *Purdah* I was disturbed and recorded this in my research diary:

*I respected and continue to respect some of Mawlana Maududi's work but strongly disagree with his interpretation that the role of Muslim women in society must revolve exclusively around her home and domestic duties.*

Research Diary, 4th September 2007

Although Maududi, like other writers, acknowledges the rights that Islam assures women, he concludes that there is little or no scope for them to enter public domains. Thus for Maududi the woman is honoured by Islam, she has been given rights and her interests have been safe-guarded in the Islamic system better than in any other society. But he stops here and refuses to let her move out of what he calls 'her own natural sphere' – her home. Throughout the book he is very critical of the 'material gains and sensual pleasures created by the fascinations of Western civilisation' (p. 82) – a post-colonial *othering* of western culture and values. A second reading of his commentary of the Holy Quran reinforced this

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<sup>7</sup> Honorific title (Esposito 2003)

<sup>8</sup> Some sources suggest that it was first published in 1905. I refer to the English translation by Masroor Khan Saroha (2001). It does not mention the date of original Urdu publication. However for convenience I will henceforth refer to this book as (Thanvi, 1905)

<sup>9</sup> It is used as part of the *Alimah* (female Muslim scholar) training in these communities.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to distinguish the term '*Purdah*' from the term '*hijab*'. *Hijab* consist of modesty guidelines for males and females as derived from the Quran and the *Sunnah*. The *hijab* as a concept includes dress code and also behavioural guidelines that Muslim men and women must adhere to. In contemporary society the word *hijab* is used to describe the headscarf worn by Muslim women.

*Purdah*, on the other hand is a term that is exclusively used for women to refer to their seclusion (Esposito 2003). Women are encouraged to cover their faces and almost exclusively limit the movements and activities to within their homes. And if a woman must venture out she must be fully covered. This is an extreme interpretation of the *hijab* that is practiced in some communities in the Indian subcontinent.



understanding of the protected and sheltered life that women must lead. He argues that this protects the woman's honour and respect as opposed to the decadence that western society heaps upon her in the name of liberalisation and rights. However in his fervour to protect Muslim women, he has demoted their social position and thereby deprived them of rights that have been divinely ordained in the Quran and the *Sunnah* (prophetic tradition).

Khan (1995) takes a stance similar to Maududi. While echoing the same sentiments that a woman's sphere is her home, he attempts to bring a slightly more liberal tone to his book. A woman positively influences outside events, but does so through male members of her family. He says that although physically women remain within the domestic sphere, mentally they go with their husbands wherever life's exigencies may take them. He concludes his book with a suggestion that despite his patriarchal stance on the social domain of women, he honours them:

It is regrettable that they do not stop to consider that, though they are the weaker sex, as a matter of biology they are the strength of the stronger sex. Therein lies the secret of women's power.

Wahiuddin Khan (1995: 246)

Both books (Khan 1995; Maududi 1972) in their criticisms of the West seem to further the same 'myth of confrontation' (Esposito 1992) propounded by western critics of Islam who declare a 'clash of civilisations' between Islam and the West (Huntington 1993).

To complete this section (on patriarchal Muslim male writers), I mention one last book – written by a woman. What is significant about this book is that although the author is a woman and a scholar herself, she perpetuates these same patriarchal values that limit a woman to domestic roles only, and also implements them in her own life. She does not name herself and chooses to identify herself on the book cover only as the 'Wife of Zarif Ahmed Thanvi'.<sup>11</sup> Other than the fact that the author is a woman, the book follows this now familiar discourse of anti-west sentiment and the woman's sphere being her home (Wife of Zarif Ahmed Thanvi 1999). I am not sure if this writer is significant, I only came across her work by chance, but her work presents an interesting case-study about the extent to which patriarchal interpretations of Islam have infiltrated the social fabric of some Muslim communities. These readings of the voices of Muslim men (and woman) describing and articulating the need and rights of Muslim women, from a patriarchal perspective is an indication of a deep philosophical gap that needs to be addressed about Muslim women's roles in certain Muslim communities. Coming back to my concerns about authority and authenticity – by writing about Muslim women from a patriarchal perspective, the 'Wife of Zarif Ahmed Thanvi' promulgates her concurrence and compliance with them. By prescribing

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<sup>11</sup> I cannot refer to this book using the usual Harvard format. To avoid confusions with (Thanvi 1905) and to acknowledge the female author's contributions I will refer to the book as (Wife of Zarif Ahmed Thanvi 1999)



them to other women, and by acknowledging the patriarchal voices as authentic, she ascribes to herself and her husband a share of theological and communal authority.

### 1.2.2 Male Scholars: Emancipatory Standpoints

These however are not the only 'male' voices about Muslim women. As I developed this literature review I realised that there are many emancipatory male voices within Muslim communities who through their writings revisit social constructs of women and their social roles. One voice that is relevant to the British context is Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, a British convert to Islam. In 1926, he recognised the need for Muslim communities to move beyond 'the Cultural Side of Islam' (Pickthall 1926). He describes the rise of early Islamic societies as caused by a focus on developing works of art, science and literature in addition to ecclesiastic learning, and argues that its subsequent decline was caused by excessive scholasticism. *Madrasas*<sup>12</sup> and Mosques ceased to be the universities that they originally were, 'the strict *zenana*<sup>13</sup> system was introduced and 'women in upper class of society, instead of playing the frank and noble part which she had played among earlier Muslims, became a tricky and intriguing captive'(p. 29). In the penultimate lecture entitled 'The Relation of the Sexes' he describes his life in India where the woman was emphatically *not*<sup>14</sup> given the rights that Islam assures her – a crime for which he asserts that the Muslim community will have to face increasing social degradation.

Asghar Ali Engineer (1992), another male author from the Indian subcontinent similarly argues for the need to depart from traditional patriarchal understandings of Muslim women that are (differently) manifested in many Muslim societies. He calls for a shift from paradigms that are cultural to those that are Islamic. For him the Muslim community as a whole needs to disengage from what he perceives as the atavisms of patriarchal culture and understand religious texts through lenses that are free from the cultural baggage that many traditional interpretations carry. Islam as a *Din*<sup>15</sup> does not deter Muslim women from achieving success in the public sphere.

More recently as part of the *Contextualising Islam in Britain* project Suleiman *et al*, (2009: 49) say that 'it is not appropriate that verses from the Quran should be used to control and dominate women and deny them access to the public arena'. Like Engineer (1992) they suggest hermeneutics as part of the solution – understanding texts in modern contexts without giving too much weight to cultural traditions. Tariq Ramadan believes that the empowerment of Muslim women is crucial not just to the women themselves but also to socio-political dynamics within the Muslim community and its relationships in pluralist society

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<sup>12</sup> Establishment of learning where the Islamic sciences are taught

<sup>13</sup> Seclusion of women in a part of the house

<sup>14</sup> Marmaduke Pickthall's emphasis

<sup>15</sup> Way of life



(Ramadan 2001). Clearly within literature written by male Muslim scholars there seem to be multiple voices and opinions – some more emancipatory than others. These voices present mutually antagonistic stances on the same theological issues. For example, where Maududi (1972) is a keen advocate and proponent of the *Purdah* system, Pickthall, also a scholar dismisses the *Purdah* system as a cultural aberration, a crime against women and against the Islamic community as a whole (1926). Again the question of religious authority arises – Is Maududi's stance or Pickthall's stance more theologically authoritative and hence more 'authentic'? I will return to this contested subject later.

### 1.2.3 The Muslim Woman's Voice

It is within these conflicting male understandings of women's issues that women have had to negotiate their intellectual stances. So what have Muslim women been writing about themselves? Here again I found a plethora of material available and multiplicity of standpoints which did not always agree with each other. Muslim women seem to have reacted to the various societal contexts and pressures that have defined and directed their lives. There is an unmentioned but obvious interface between male and female writers. These female writers concur with the male writers (like Ramadan 2001; Engineer 1992, 2003; Pickthall 1926) who call for the need to interpret religion for itself or within 'modern' contexts rather than through lenses that are influenced by patriarchal culture. This may be understood as a process of negotiation of their scholarly authority that they ultimately derive by concurring with men whose (emancipatory) opinions they prefer. This literature could also be a result of their independent perceptions of themselves as authentic voices for Muslim women because notionally they are 'real Muslim women'.

Le Doeuff (1989) describes a more philosophical form of feminism articulated by women who address both men and women together, the public and legislators together in the hope that the ensuing discussion will address false problems and make human relations a little better. Perhaps it is within a partnership of mutual respect between men and women that clearer understanding of the authority of religious scholarship can be agreed upon – as believers, men and women both have a right to choose how they interpret their faith. The female writers I discuss in this section go back to core Islamic texts reinterpreting and rearticulating theological philosophy through women's voices. Through their reliance on the Quran and the *hadith*, these writers address both male and female audiences, citing religious doctrine in support of women's rights and emancipation. Nimat Barazangi (2004) reads the Quran 'pedagogically' to derive a firm grounding within which Muslim women can explore their self-identity and also reclaim their position as authoritative commentators, interpreters and disseminators of Islamic knowledge. Amina Wadud-Muhsin (1992) and Asma Barlas (2002) present their work about their readings of the Quran. Laleh Bakhtiar (2007) completed the first translation of the Quran into English by a woman.



Bewley (1999), a convert, Islamic scholar and Arabic language expert similarly focuses on traditional sources of Islamic knowledge to establish the stand-point she takes in the title of her book, *Islam: The Empowering of Women*. She examines how Muslim women in the past successfully undertook various social roles:

- scholarly roles in education and propagation of Islamic doctrines
- being active in political spheres
- the spiritual and religious roles

She, like Engineer (1992) asserts the need to depart from cultural understandings of Islam. She also briefly describes the backwardness of Muslim woman as a legacy of colonialism which dismissed Islam as 'barbaric' while European, western customs and traditions were portrayed as more civilised. She also describes 'ressentiment', which she defines as first allowing oneself (Muslims) to be defined by this 'barbaric / civilised' dichotomy and then defending it, thus giving it a reality which it did not have to begin with. Ayesha Bewley (1999) mentions the excessive focus on the *hijab* in discourses about women both within the Muslim community and in pluralist society. She asserts the need for communities to move beyond such *hijab*-centric outlooks to wider dialogue and debate about the role and rights of contemporary Muslim women. The *hijab* is hence over-determined as a symbol of the piety and integrity of a Muslim woman and/or her 'belongingness' or 'isolation' from a community.

This idea is further explored by Ahmed (1992) in her deconstructions of the meanings associated with the *hijab* that Muslim women wear which identifies some women as Muslim. She says that this practice of *hijab* or 'covering up' was what, according to the imperialist ideology, stood in the way of the 'progress' and 'civilisation' of Muslim societies (Ahmed 1992). She further describes how the elite within Muslim society saw themselves as 'equals' with the western colonisers and internalised these descriptions of *hijab* and the role of Muslim women. This led to a dichotomy, individuals who sought to conform to western culture and standards while others opposed everything that could be described as western. The lives and work of two Egyptian Feminists illustrate this – Fatima Mernissi and Zainab Ghazzali – who worked towards women's rights from two different perspectives (Ahmed 1992; Cooke 2001).

While Fatima Mernissi accepted western philosophies and strived to work for women's rights in a context that was 'western', Zainab Ghazzali tried to garner rights for women within a framework that was Islamic. Between them they have set up a template for Muslim women's activism, which can either be dismissive of Islamic faith values or which can embrace them. My readings of Leila Ahmed indicate a degree of self-orientalism (or what Bewley (1999) describes as resentment), this is particularly obvious in her comparison between the lives of Khadija and Ayesha who were two wives of the Prophet (pbuh). She claims that because



Khadija had achieved her successes (in business) before the advent of Islam in Arabia, she had more independence and autonomy as compared to Ayesha who was born in the Islamic era. While she briefly recognises the political role that Ayesha played after Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) death, her argument is weakened in its failure to recognise Ayesha's religious authority in early Islamic history (Bewley 1999, Ansari *et al* 2003; Abdul Qadir 2006) as a narrator of *hadiths* and as one of the greatest living scholars of her time who autonomously issued *fatwas*<sup>16</sup> (Ansari *et al* 2003). While distinguishing between the lives of Khadija and Ayesha, Ahmed furthers a one-sided view of Islam and in her efforts to portray Islam as limiting women's agency and rights, she falls into a trap not dissimilar from Maududi's stance (1972). By failing to acknowledge Ayesha's reputation as an Islamic scholar she disempowers Muslim women by rejecting the successes of this woman who is an archetype for all *Sunni*<sup>17</sup> Muslims.

In her work Bullock (2003), a convert to Islam, revisits understandings of the veil and Muslim women. She presents a similar reading of Leila Ahmed whom she classifies as the type of 'liberal feminist' who attempts to listen to and present the voices of covered women, but who ultimately remain convinced that 'life in a veil is still oppressive' (p. xvi). She criticises the standpoints and work of such authors whom she calls 'liberal feminists' – Muslim and Non-Muslim – which she feels are more sophisticated than the oppressed and subjugated stereotypes of Muslim women that are characteristic of the media, but which nevertheless dismiss the voices of Muslim women and refuse to understand the importance of Islam to Muslim women. Bullock uses textual analysis of traditional Muslim sources as well as ethnographic work with Muslim women to suggest alternate understandings of the *hijab* as not oppressive and which are representative of the opinions of the women who wear them.

Muslim women's voices are in no way homogeneous; rather they represent a variety of ideas that indicate a need to accept their religious practices and beliefs. The *hijab* for example becomes a matter of choice rather than oppression. Their activism is centred on garnering rights for themselves and for their sisters which are already assured to them by their religion but which seem to have been lost in their cultural milieux.

#### 1.2.4 The Orientalist Depiction of the Muslim as the 'Different Other'

Katherine Bullock (2003), Leila Ahmed (1992), Abula'la Maududi (1972) and others (Ali 2002; Jameelah 2007) all seem to be unanimous in their criticisms of the Orientalists' approach to Islamic studies and their writings about Muslim women. Ayesha Bewley also criticises commentaries by self-orientalised Muslims. I decided to explore the basis of their

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<sup>16</sup> Authoritative legal opinion given by a mufti (legal scholar) in response to a question posed by an individual or a court of law (Esposito 2003).

<sup>17</sup> *Sunni* and *Shii* Islam are two main denominational groups with Islam. There are further denominations within these two groups.



criticisms. Said (1978) criticises Orientalists and their 'othering' of the Orient as exotic, irrational and 'manifestly different' from the occident. For him Orientalism was a tool created by and for western colonisers, who used it to produce and manage images of the 'Orient' that justified their occupation of lands and peoples who were uncultured and who needed the western world to bring semblances of civilisation to them. He says, 'In having to take up a position of irreducible opposition to a region of the world it considered alien to its own, Orientalism failed to identify with human experience and also failed to see it as human experience' (Said 1978: 328).

At the other end of this argument, Robert Irwin (2006) takes the opposite standpoint and criticises Said's (1978) book as a work of 'malignant charlatany' (p. 2 - 3). He argues that Orientalists had no overarching and constraining discourse and no hidden agendas. According to Irwin, many Orientalists regarded their scholarly research as a form of prayer, and were sincere in presenting honest representations of the oriental world. Nevertheless Irwin falls into the same trap that Said criticises when he mentions the work of Orientalists who described the 'wonders' and 'marvels' of the Orient and cites Thomas Warton's *History of Poetry* (1774-81) 'Dragons are a sure mark of Orientalism'. The Orient and its people were hence othered as exotic and different (the dragons may also indicate an element of danger) who were to be viewed with suspicion and fear. This is a stance which continues to persist today in the media and in certain strands of literature which take a polemical view of Islam and Muslims.

The French academic Maxime Rodinson initially seems to tread the middle path in his work exploring European obsessions with the 'mystique of Islam'. After a historical exploration of European attitudes towards Islam and the orient he provides his readers with evidence of diatribe emerging from Europe which on some occasions is admiring of the 'excellent lessons of the Muslim moralists' or 'Muslim tolerance towards all religious minorities' (Rodinson 2002: 46), but also criticising and othering Muslims on other occasions. He is critical of Said's *Orientalism*, saying that it does make a point about bias and unfairness of Orientalists' portrayals of Muslims but disagrees with Said methods which he feels were too generalised and which ignored the good work of some Orientalists. Nevertheless about Orientalism as an outlook, he concludes (rather incriminatingly):

There is no such thing as Orientalism [...] There is no such thing as the East [...] There are still Orientalists who are imprisoned, many quite contentedly, in their own small cells of Orientalism. The concept of Orientalism itself sprang from pragmatic necessities that forced themselves on European scholars devoted to the study of other cultures. This situation was reinforced by European dominance over other societies, and the result was a greatly distorted vision of things.

Maxime Rodinson (2002: 117 - 118).



Reina Lewis (1996) brings a woman's voice to this discourse and some balance in this clearly polarized discussion. She agrees with Said (1978) that the success of Orientalism for the west depended not just on domination but on the exercise of hegemony and the development of consent – that the orientalised other was brought to recognise the validity of Orientalist knowledge and abide by its implementation. But she challenges Said's work and the paradigmatically male, colonial subject he outlines. Rather than Orientalist images of women she explores representations *by* women, but decides that the European woman traveller (in the Orient), also placed indigenous women either as *other* and inferior, cruelly repressed or wantonly promiscuous. She discusses a need to acknowledge the myriad and convoluted balance of subjected and social payments instituted by imperialism, to talk of the possibility of opposition without proof of absolute purity or absolute oppression. She concludes that by resorting to blaming and silencing we will not be able to effectively shift the discursive paradigms that structure our existence.

For me this discourse indicated a need to move away from Orientalist perspectives towards what Siddiqui (2007) describes as an approach to Islamic Studies that views Muslims as an integral part of multicultural society. His approach to Islamic studies is indicative of a wider need for an epistemological shift from the study (and therefore portrayal) of Islam as external to British contexts towards inclusive models that incorporate the opinions of the different other (whoever it may be and not just Muslim women).

### **1.2.5 Airport Literature (!)**

I now move from the discursive framing of Muslim women in scholarly literature to the popular framing and *othering* of Muslim women. A number of voices and opinions, including the voices of Muslim women (Badran, 2002) may be accessed on the internet. A female Muslim academic blogs about an 'excursion to a bookshop' where she saw a display of books that had on their covers 'veiled faces that expose nothing but a pair of beautiful eyes' (Al-Mahedin 2007). The book blurbs, as obvious from the covers, indicate that the authors are Muslim. The story-lines are all about the women's journeys to escape profound atrocities – honour killings, forced marriages, slavery. The bookshop arranged these books together in what she felt was an attempt to create an 'ensemble of terror' in which they all became perceived simply as 'Muslim women'. She concludes that:

The brown/black woman of the erstwhile colonial discourse may have spoken. But the din of the few voices that have been heard produce a totalising, essentialist mythology about Islam. They are heard as a symphony rather than solo concertos.



This genre of writing may be called 'Airport Literature', which Clyne (2003) defines in some detail:

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.

Irene Clyne (2003: 20)

These books are characterised by eye catching covers and titles, and effective marketing. A shelf-full of veiled faces promise prospective readers stories of injustices in foreign locales, different from the reader's habitat, and which reinforce the undiscerning readers beliefs in the superiority of one culture over another, which then is othered as the misogynist, exotic and *different* perpetuator of injustices against women.

*The Second Plane* (2008) is a collection of fictional essays and short stories written by academic and novelist Martin Amis in response to the events of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 and the 'war on terror'. In the introduction to the book he claims not be an Islamophobe - who is afraid of Islam, on the contrary he claims respect and admiration for Islam, Muslims and their prophet - Muhammad (pbuh). Rather he takes a stance against Islamism: a violent ideology which he claims was the inspiration for the violent perpetrators of '9/11'. Nevertheless as the book progresses through a fictional account of the last days of Muhammad Atta – the pilot of the first plane to hit the towers and other stories, gradually the distinction between Islam and Islamism blurs into the same 'airport literature' schema. The case of an American Muslim woman who is beaten to pulp by her Islamist husband (p. 66) for answering the telephone is presented to the reader as representative of the situation of all Muslim women. He then goes on to assert that the 'dominion of the male is Koranic (*sic*)' and quotes, out of context, the oft-repeated verse of the Quran<sup>18</sup> that supposedly permits husbands to beat their wives. This is a favourite of well-minded emancipators of Muslim women who choose to free her from an 'oppressive, misogynist' religion. What *The Second Plane* and other texts fail to do is present the holistic context within which these verses are mentioned. They also fail to mention any of the *hadiths* which typically qualify and clarify individual Quranic revelations.

Airport literature is significant within the objectives of my research because in their adamant criticism of Islam as a misogynist faith, they strengthen the oppressed-subjugated stereotype

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<sup>18</sup> Holy Quran, Chapter 4: An-Nisa, Verse number 34.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali translates this verse as follows "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them Means (of annoyance): for Allah is most high, great (above you all)."



of Muslim women. Some Muslim women voice their disagreement with such literature - Huda Khattab, a female convert to Islam discusses and deconstructs 'women in Islam' issues like polygamy, *Purdah*, and female genital mutilation which, she says, together with out-of-context quotes from the Quran and the *hadith* provide 'ammunition to use against Islam and Muslims' (Khattab 2007: 19). While it is not within the remit of this research project to indulge in detailed scriptural exegesis and hermeneutics, it nevertheless becomes relevant to address at least some of the misconceptions that uncontextualised readings of the scriptures can create. Huda Khattab discusses verse 4:34, the 'famous beating verse'<sup>19</sup> (2007: 79 - 94) that Martin Amis quotes. She contextualises the historical context in which this verse was revealed – in pre-Islamic tribal Arab society where violence towards women was common, this verse acted as an inhibitor against such acts of abuse against women. The verse is not permission but 'a severe restriction of existing practices' (Wadud-Muhsin 1992: 76). *Hadiths* relate that the Prophet (pbuh) never beat any of his wives on the basis of which the *Shafii Madhhab*<sup>20</sup> strictly prohibits (Ali 2006) and the other *Madhabib* strongly discourage any such acts of violence against women. In the only translation of the Quran (into English) by a woman, the words 'to beat' do not come up at all. Rather Laleh Bakhtiar (2007: 70) translates the same words as 'to go away' indicating separation between spouses who experience disloyalty.<sup>21</sup>

*The Second Plane* fails to give its readers a sense of these alternate (and less sensational) readings of verse 4:34 and also of the debate that surrounds this verse in the Muslim community. It presents only one controversial interpretation of this verse that supposedly sanctions the abuse of women. Amis (2008) gives this patriarchal reading a sense of legitimacy and authority which it does not deserve. By quoting this interpretation, he implies that it is true and hence discounts the validity of other interpretations.

Popular representations of Islam, and specifically Muslim women, seem to be constructed out of what seem to be the dregs<sup>22</sup> of society. These books together with other media shape public opinion of Islam and Muslims, creating a new kind of oppression of Muslim women, through the images they promote. The reader learns little about Muslim women and their societies but develops a sense of rage at their treatment and misogynist stereotypes of Islam and Muslims are reinforced (Clyne 2003). Like the medieval church dismissing Islam as a Christian heresy (Siddiqui 1997), Orientalist depictions of the different other (Said 1978; Lewis 1996) and more modern representations of atrocities against women in Afghanistan (BBC 2009b), books like *The Second Plane* marginalise Muslim women (and men) by using

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<sup>19</sup> See above footnote 18

<sup>20</sup> One of the four *Sunni Madhabs* or schools of law; the four *Sunni* schools of thought being *Hanafi*, *Shafii*, *Maliki* and *Hanbali* schools of Law. Plural: *Madhabib*

<sup>21</sup> Please read Khattab 2007; Wadud-Muhsin 1992 & Bakhtiar 2007 for a detailed exegetical analysis of verse 4:34 – Holy Quran, Chapter 4, Verse 34

<sup>22</sup> I do not like using this word to describe a part of society and only regrettably use it as it seems to best fit the meaning I am trying to convey.



the most negative experiences of women's rights abuse to typify the lives of *all* Muslim women.

### 1.2.6 Feminist Literature & the Muslim Woman

I now move on to the last of my 'categories' of dominant voices on Muslim women – feminist literature. Given the breadth of opinion within feminist thought, it is problematic, to say the least, to know where to begin such a piece of writing and what to include. I subscribe to a definition of feminism as women's demands and activism for their full rights as human beings (Watkins *et al* 1992) which I consider compatible with my Islamic faith. This, however, does not stop me from exploring some disagreements that came in up in my reading of the relationships between feminisms and Islam. Katherine Bullock (2003) for example uses the term 'liberal feminist' to describe 'women who are committed to women's rights and believe that Islam does not allow women liberation' (p. xvi). They may or may not listen to Muslim women's arguments but either way they conclude that 'a satisfying life in the veil is still an oppressed life' (p. xvi). Nimat Barazangi (2004) refers to 'Western secular feminists' whose methods she says will not lead to lasting solutions for the secondary status of women in some Muslim communities because they ignore 'the spiritual and intellectual world-view of the people who identify with the Quran' (p. 8 - 9). Afshar & Maynard (2000) describe the hegemony of 'Western Feminism' which meant that much of the work done by the end of the twentieth century was and still is being written by and for white, middle class women (p. 809).

An antagonistic view of feminist methodologies and activism underpins these various terminologies. Feminists are accused of a blinkered vision of womanhood that failed to contextualise the different ways of *being* a woman. Other women – women of colour, third-world women and (specific to this research) Muslim women did make vibrant contributions, but too often their position was 'delineated in terms of differing from a norm that was western and usually Anglophone' (Afshar & Maynard 2000 p. 809). I needed to explore if this accusation of the ideological monopoly of western feminist's ideals of womanhood and women's rights implied that there was no room for a shared struggle.

One of the earliest western women to write about Muslim women was Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1716 - 1717). Perhaps it may have been more appropriate to have included her work in the section about Orientalists' representations of Muslim women. Indeed Mary Montagu is often described as the first female Orientalist writer about the Orient.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless she is also known as an avid woman's rights activist and it is in her position at the interface between feminism and discourse about Muslim women that I include her work

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<sup>23</sup> The inclusion of Turkey in the 'Orient' is indicative of the fluidity of labels and also the Orientalist's obsession with Islam rather than the "geographical Orient".



here. Her *Turkish Embassy letters* provide an interesting and detailed account of Turkish life including the lives of Turkish Muslim women, which had heretofore been undocumented or misrepresented in male writers' narratives.<sup>24</sup>

Contrary to Lewis's (1996) analysis that female Orientalist's empathy with native women was frequently structured by assumptions of white superiority; Montagu's attitude seems to be more nuanced. Her descriptions of the nudity of Turkish women in public baths, her refusal to participate in these activities, and her paintings are viewed by some as indicative of her notions of her own superiority. However her letters depict an informed respect for the Turkish 'Muhammadans' (*sic*) values and life-styles. In one letter she says 'these people are not so unpolished as we represent them. 'Tis true their magnificence is of a very different taste from ours and perhaps of a better' (Montagu 1716 - 1717, p. 369). She was so impressed with the rights of Turkish women she asserted she would use their liberties as a stick to beat English society with (Grundy 1999). In another letter Montagu disagreed that the veil was oppressive and argued instead, that in her own experience although it was uncomfortable wearing it for the first time, it gave the women the freedom to create their own realm that was separate from male authority.

However, when three-quarters of a century later Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her ground-breaking *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), her imagery of Islam and Muslim women was diametrically different from Mary Montagu's stance. It is important to clarify that her criticisms of Islam are not a central aspect of her work which is aimed to achieve the emancipation of 18<sup>th</sup> century British women by giving them education that was similar to the education received by men. Moreover her book made important contributions to women's rights in 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain, particularly educational rights. However on the first page of her introduction she compares British patriarchy's treatment of women to 'the true style of 'mahometanism' (*sic*), [in which] they [Muslim women] are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species' (p. 7). Elsewhere she comments that Islam deprives women of souls regulating them to being beautiful and obedient objects (p. 20).

Weber (2006) in her commentary on Wollstonecraft's references to Muslims, argues that Wollstonecraft was misinformed due to prevalent (mis)information on other religions in 18th century Britain and that perhaps Wollstonecraft sought to gain support for her cause by rhetorically comparing and contrasting British patriarchy with Islam which was already (in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) the different and evil 'other'. Mary Wollstonecraft's portrayal of Muslim women and Islam is particularly disconcerting as it is arguably the second significant piece of early

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<sup>24</sup> Montagu knew that as a woman she had privileged access to the Turkish women, like no other male chronicler before her. She often dismissed male writers' accounts of Turkish women as inaccurate because they had never had access to Turkish women, who in spite of their relative freedom still lived segregated lives, and would especially refrain from meeting from the foreign male traveller.



feminist literature and when compared to her predecessor Mary Montagu's work, this is compelling evidence of the way portrayals of Muslim women have changed. Mohja Kahf (1999) alludes to this change in her exploration of portrayals of Muslim women in the West. She concludes that although history records images of Muslim women in western culture which constituted 'a shifting, contingent, heterogeneous jumble' (p. 176), the dominant narratives of Muslim women in western discourse from about the 18<sup>th</sup> century basically state that the Muslim woman was 'innately oppressed' (p. 177).

The image of the Muslim woman as oppressed was further solidified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when western imperialists colonised Muslim nations. Often self-orientalism (or Bewley's (1999) *ressentiment*) of higher-class natives meant that 'western' values were frequently accepted as superior. Much of what was written about Muslim women focussed on the institution of the veil, with anthropologists and historians alike relating the practice to social organisation in a given society (Lambert-Hurley 2007). The unvoiced, unheard and invisible Muslim woman had to be freed from her cage. *Hijabs*, veils, head coverings of various sorts were labelled as symbolic of misogynist culture, of backwardness and of the need for external interventions leading to emancipation. That the western colonists understood it as regressive and uncultured was enough to demand unveiling and a persuasion to imbibe the true spirit of western civilisation (Ahmed 1992; Bullock 2003). Cromer, the British Agent and Consul-General of Egypt from 1883 to 1907 was of the opinion that:

The position of women in Egypt (was) a fatal obstacle to the attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of the European civilisation'

Cromer<sup>25</sup> (cited in Bullock 2003: 21).

To move on to late 19<sup>th</sup> century / early 20<sup>th</sup> century first wave feminism; these were essentially western localised movements, including the British suffrage movement (Holton 1995; Pugh 1980) that were a reaction to patriarchal attitudes in the west. They were more interested in demanding social policy change to garner women's rights at a local level than in establishing a universal sisterhood and rights for all women. These feminists had limited interactions with Muslims or women from other ethnic backgrounds (Lewis 1996; Midgley 1995) and when they did meet, their interactions were coloured by their social contexts including colonialism or slavery which determined the relationships they developed. These early feminists set up the foundations upon which feminist ideology was developed. They did help women from other backgrounds, but while intentionality cannot be easily deciphered, it is argued by some that they helped these 'other' women for reasons of self-righteousness or pity (Lewis 1996) rather than a feminist giving of voice.

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<sup>25</sup> Paradoxically in Britain, Cromer was a leading figure in the (British) Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage. This is recorded both in Bullock (2003) and in Ahmed (1992) which makes it hard to see him as an advocate of women's rights.



While first wave feminists demanded political rights for women, second wave feminism (1960s and 70s) sought to move beyond the political spheres of women's existence and into women's social and economic lives. De Beauvoir (1949) wrote her influential book challenging notions of family, sexuality and women's roles as a wife and a mother. In Britain, Germaine Greer (1970) drew upon Wollstonecraft's work to dismantle the stereotype of the woman as a beautiful and manicured plaything for men. She asserts, 'I refuse to be a female impersonator, I am a woman!' (p. 192). This feminism encouraged women to stop defining their life through service to others (Walter, 2010) as daughters, wives and mothers; instead it sought to give women independence.

However this movement grew out of first wave feminism and was sometimes perceived as an exclusively middle-class white movement that got its ideals from the political struggles of social-haves in western society (Brah & Phoenix 2004; Afshar & Maynard 2000). This led to the development in the 1990s of what is now known as third-wave feminism: women of colour began to articulate their needs and demands. These new feminists interspersed arguments against racism along with arguments against sexism and classism. They argued that women of colour were both sexually and racially marginalised and they had to challenge these in their *own* language and using symbols and norms that were their *own*. Alice Walker, bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldua are some of the icons of this movement that was firmly rooted in the cultures of the women who voiced it. However it is important to note that women across all three phases and from all backgrounds have had to voice culture-specific struggles for rights, for example see this excerpt from a speech by Sojourner Truth (1867), who died in 1883:

They have got their liberty – so much good luck to have slavery partly destroyed; not entirely. I want its root and branch destroyed. Then we will all be free indeed. I feel that if I have to answer for the deeds done in my body just as much as man, I have the right to have just as much as a man. There is a great stir about coloured men getting their rights, but not a word about the coloured women; and if coloured men get their rights, and not coloured women theirs, you see the coloured men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as before.[...] I want you to consider on that, chil'n. I call you chil'n; you are somebody's chil'n, and I am old enough to be the mother of all that is here. I want women to have their rights. In the courts women have no right, no voice, nobody speaks for them. I wish women to have her voice there among the pettifoggers. If it is not a fit place for women, it is unfit for men to be there.

Sojourner Truth, excerpt from her address to the First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association, New York City, May 9<sup>th</sup> 1847 (Truth 1867)

As a woman and as a Muslim, I have my agreements and disagreements with all three waves of feminism. I am grateful for the political rights that first wave feminism garnered for women. I understand that Islam gave women the rights to voice their political opinions



(Bewley, 1999); earn and save their own money;<sup>26</sup> and the right to inherit and own property<sup>27</sup> centuries before the suffragist successfully fought for these rights. However I also know that due to patriarchal norms currently prevalent in many Muslim cultures, Muslim women are often denied these rights. Muslim women hence have a religious right and duty to struggle for these rights that have been denied to them.

I have been aware of Muslim women's suspicion and refusal to engage with feminism: my own initial hesitation to read and work with feminist texts is perhaps indicative of Muslim women's criticisms of feminist struggles. After my explorations of the literature I conclude that first wave feminism is not really problematic. It may be articulated from a white, western standpoint but nevertheless it articulates demands that can coexist with women's rights as derived from Islamic texts. However second wave feminism with its equating female emancipation with sexual liberation is problematic for Muslim women. Second wave feminism brought great freedoms and rights for women, but it is also critiqued. Walter (2010) for example is concerned that Second wave feminism has been incorporated into unequal power structures in a way that deprives women of choice. Jameelah feels that extreme interpretations of feminism led to the collapse of traditional social structures including the family (2009).

Third wave feminisms in their critiques of white, middle class women's feminism and culturally contextualised approach to women's studies could have resolved the disagreements that many Muslim women had. Indeed many Latino women were inspired by the *Mujerista* movement that contextualised Latino languages, theological understandings and feminist demands for rights into a movement that was relevant to *their* realities (Asisi-Diaz 1989; Anzaldua 1987). Similarly Alice Walker's (and others) writings clearly articulate black women's Womanist struggles that incorporated threads contesting white supremacy and histories of slavery, and reminded women of their African cultural roots (Walker 1983). However when it came to articulations of Islamic feminism, the early writers (Mernissi 1985, 1991; El Saadawi 1980) presented arguments that did not contextualise Muslim women's religiosity, instead they concurred with western criticisms of Islam's treatment of women. Islam was presented as oppressive to women, the veil or the hijab became a symbol of Muslim women's oppression and according to Bullock (2003: xxv) these feminists sought to 'remove all aspects of Islamic Law that did not conform to a secular liberal feminist standard of equality and liberation for women'. This alleged self-orientalisation of some Muslim feminists resulted in a genre of Islamic feminism that rather than engage with Muslim women, alienated many of them. Kahf, for example in her research about representations of Muslim women in west, comments about the lasting effects of the oppressed-repressed images of Muslim women. She says:

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<sup>26</sup> Holy Quran Chapter 4, Verse No. 32

<sup>27</sup> Holy Quran Chapter 4, Verse No. 7



it [oppressed Muslim women imagery] produces Muslim women who affirm this statement by being either submissive nonentities or rebellious renegades - rebellious against their own Islamic world, that is, and conforming to Western gender roles' Mohja Kahf (1999: 177).

It is unfortunate that these anti-veil and anti-Islam ontologies dominated feminist discourses and activism relevant to Muslim women rather than Montagu's (1716 - 1717) early attempts to experience and contextualise the voices of Muslim women as integral to attempts to emancipate them. As recently as 2003, feminist literature portrays the veil as a cultural practice that has been imposed by men upon women (Hirschmann 2003) rather than as a *religious* practice that women may choose to wear. This is in complete contrast to Montagu's opinion that the veil gave Muslim women the opportunity to create their own spaces that were free from male authority (1716 - 1717). It is this distinction between religion and culture, choice and imposition, fair representation and misrepresentation that some feminist writers fail to make.

For example Fatima Mernissi (1985) recognises this 'well-established tradition to discuss Muslim women by comparing them, implicitly or explicitly, to Western women [...] in the general pattern [...] who is more civilised than whom' (p. 8) (also, Hussein 1984). However she equates at least the external aspects of liberation with abandoning the veil – 'The veil is an expression of the invisibility of women on the street, a male space par excellence' (p. 100). She feels however that the problems are more deep rooted and explores Moroccan (rather than Islamic) constructs of female sexuality, marriage and family. She postulates arguments for inherent sexual inequality in Islam based on her assumptions that in Islam a woman is a dangerous sexual being who distracts man from the worship of Allah;<sup>28</sup> Muslim marriages that are based on domination (p. 19); and heterosexual love (between husband and wife) is a danger that must be overcome (p. 113). What is strange is that even though she demonstrates, through her writings, extensive knowledge of Islamic theology she does not contextualise well-known and unanimously accepted Islamic rulings that encourage both emotional and sexual love between husband and wife. Marriage is encouraged as fulfilling half the religion of a believer;<sup>29</sup> family life and fulfilling family duties as perpetual *ibadah*<sup>30</sup> and sexual love between husband and wife as a form of *ibadah* rather than a distraction.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This is similar to Christian patriarchy's 'blaming' of Eve for the Fall which is contrary to Islamic theological understandings which hold *both* Adam and Eve (peace be upon them both) responsible for the Fall.

<sup>29</sup> This is based on various *hadith* narrations for e.g., "When the slave enters matrimony, he has completed half of his religion"- a *sahih* or authentic *hadith* recorded in Ibn Mājah

<sup>30</sup> Worship

<sup>31</sup> [...] and in man's sexual Intercourse (with his wife) there is a *Sadaqa* (charity). They (the Companions) said: Messenger of Allah, is there reward for him who satisfies his sexual passion among us? He said: Tell me, if he were to devote it to something forbidden, would it not be a sin on his part? Similarly, if he were to devote it to something lawful, he should have a reward. *Sahih Muslim*, Book 5, Number 2198



Through this brief overview of the literature about feminist attitudes towards and about Muslim women, I have tried to clarify the reasons for many Muslims' and my own suspicions of feminism, but this was not the end of my journey.

### 1.2.7 A Second Expedition into Feminism

My readings of criticisms of feminism did not convince me of their validity. I did not fully agree with the criticisms – women from *all* socio-cultural backgrounds were and still are often denied their rights. Surely a movement that campaigned for their rights was justifiable. This inspired me to take a second plunge into feminist readings. The influences of patriarchy were clearly evident in some Muslim societies' denial of women's rights. Le Doeuff (1998) writes about women's gradual marginalisation from the processes of knowledge formation and dissemination. This was the same argument that I was making about Muslim women's lack of involvement in Islamic religious discourse. I have already mentioned Ayesha, the wife of the prophet and pre-eminent Islamic scholar; historically there seem to have been a number of women like her, however according to Bewley (2007) there is considerable reduction in the number of Muslim women scholars in the last 300 years. This is indicative of a feminist need for Muslim women to reclaim knowledge. Clearly there are overarching feminist tendencies in my research – by and for women – so maybe I misunderstood feminism (perhaps in the same way as many feminists misunderstood Islam). As per Naomi Wolf's (1994) definition of feminism, there is no doubt I am a feminist. She says, 'you are a feminist if you believe:

- Women matter as much as men do
- Women have the right to determine their lives
- Women's experiences matter
- Women have the right to tell the truth about their experiences
- Women deserve more of whatever it is they are not getting enough of because they are women: respect, self-respect, education, safety, health, representation, money'

This was what Islam taught me:

- *O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women. Be careful of your duty toward Allah in Whom ye claim (your rights) of one another, and toward the wombs (that bear you). Lo! Allah hath been a watcher over you.*

Holy Quran, Chapter 4, Verse 1<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Pickthall's translation



- *The Believers, men and women, are protectors one of another: they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practise regular charity, and obey Allah and His Messenger. On them will Allah pour His mercy: for Allah is Exalted in power, Wise.*

Holy Quran, Chapter 9, Verse 71

- *For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, - for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward.*

Holy Quran, Chapter 33, Verse 35

As a Muslim woman and feminist researcher I was beginning to see how I could reconcile many aspects of feminism with my Islamic faith. Nevertheless I continued to be troubled by other aspects, for example descriptions of the term 'woman' which dismissed gender as a cultural manifestation of societal paradigms of differences between the sexes (Butler 1990). While I can see how to some extent society inscribes gender with its own meanings,<sup>33</sup> I do not agree with Butler's critique of the sex-gender dichotomy. I was also troubled by the insistence of the proto-feminist on the homogeneity among women – identical problems which required the same solutions. I also disagreed with some feminists' (Daly 1985) distinctly misandrist tendencies. Was there room within feminist discourse to negotiate these differences of opinion? As I delved further into feminism, I realised that there was.

When it came to the gender-sex dialectic feminists such as French philosopher Irigaray (1993) writes that 'sexed identity is important to our time' because even though 'it cannot possibly escape from social norms', among other reasons 'sexual difference is necessary for the continuation of our species' (p.15 - 16). Notions of homogeneity have clearly been challenged over the last decade by third wave feminists. The contextualised differences amongst women have come to the fore, acknowledging the fact that women's situational existence goes a long way in determining their experiences (Afshar & Maynard 1994; McDowell 1997; Bordo 1992; Maynard 2000; Stanley 1990; Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002). Third wave feminist understandings accepted the heterogeneity within the sisterhood and recognised that feminist activism had to contextualise differences of caste, class, culture,

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<sup>33</sup> Research Journal entry 26<sup>th</sup> Dec 2009: A pregnant friend needed to buy baby clothes during the boxing-day sales. Simple enough task - but we had a problem - her last scan had not been able to tell the sex of her baby! All the clothes were either pink for girls or blue for boys and we needed to find clothes that would do for either. So on one level I can understand Bulter's argument.



religion and ethnicity among women. Finally feminist thinkers like Le Doeuff (1989) clearly called for partnerships between men and women.

These forays into feminism made me appreciate the efforts of proto-feminist movements which worked for rights of women in particular social contexts. However with their insistence on the universality of women, the achievements of these movements in the emancipation of women were over-shadowed because they were perceived as western movements articulated by and for white western women. These movements' perceptions of women's issues in the wider world arena were deemed insensitive to the context and situation of women who lived in societies different from their own. Their actions were hence viewed as well-intended but narrow in conceptualisation (Afshar & Maynard 2000; Jeenah 2003). They lacked adequate grounding in historical perspectives of diversity amongst women (Bhavani 1994) and it is argued that by failing to acknowledge these differences, proto-feminists' voicings of diverse women's concerns were weakened (Jeenah 2003).

I was also however convinced that a feminist voicing of the aspirations, opinions and goals of Muslim women was essential not just to challenge the patriarchal understandings of religion prevalent in many cultures within the Muslim *Ummah* but to also challenge the deep-rooted prejudices that has led to 'othering' of Muslim women in pluralist and increasingly secular societies. I agree with Barazangi (2004) when she calls for cross fertilisation and a sharing of ideas and values between feminist activism and theological activism which both strive for the rights of Muslim women.

### 1.3 Religious Authenticity

The reader by now will be aware of the contentious nature of authoritative claims for authenticity. I have often been tempted to describe the voice of Muslim women that this research will present as the Authentic Voice. But what is authenticity, who defines it and can everybody ever agree with one overarching utopian authentic authority? This is an issue I kept running into and arguments around authenticity will continue to resurface throughout this thesis in various manifestations. To reflect back through this chapter, there were a number of occasions where I have either explicitly mentioned the word authenticity or authentic or I have implicitly made reference to issues surrounding authenticity by comparing or contrasting themes, opinions, people, or constructs that compete with each other.

When I explored Muslim male voices, I encountered both voices that may be understood as patriarchal and those that may be understood as emancipatory. Both sets of voices were interpreting the same Quran that all Muslims consider irrevocably God's authentic word, but their interpretations were so different, they bordered on being antagonistic to each other. I



also wrote about Muslim women scholars reinterpreting faith through their own female lenses (Bakhtiar 2007; Barlas 2002; Wadud-Muhsin1992). So whose was an authentic voice? This is a difficult area that needs to be understood on many different levels:

1. God's divine authority is uncontested within Islamic theology and the Quran is undeniably and irrefutably God's word. This is acceptable across all Muslim denominations. For Muslims living in secular society, the latter's scepticism of God and scriptural authority can lead to conflict (Suleiman *et al* 2009)
2. The Quran is open to interpretation and different denominational groups have their preferred translators and commentators that are collectively acknowledged within that group. This is where authenticity first becomes contentious. The case study below illustrates some of the disagreements that are possible in such debates about authenticity and authority of interpretations of the Quran.

#### ***Case Study 1: First Translation of the Holy Quran into English by a Woman***

When Laleh Bakhtiar became the first woman to translate the Quran she faced opposition for departing from the dominant patriarchal translations of some verses and for instead translating from a feminine perspective. A news paper reported that some of her critics cited her lack of fluency in modern Arabic as a shortcoming, a criticism that has not been applied to other translators who were also not native speakers. Bakhtiar refutes these criticisms maintaining that, "It's not a valid criticism, because the Quran is written in classical Arabic [...] If you go through all the criticisms, when it comes down to it, the only difference is because I'm a woman. Obviously." One male scholar from the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) even considered banning her translation (Scrivener 2007).

Later ISNA asked the male scholar to retract his comments and they issued a statement supporting the translation (The Sublime Quran 2007). Incidentally the president of ISNA then was a woman and a convert to Islam, Dr Ingrid Mattson through whom this support was achieved and who was in a position of higher authority than the male scholar.

3. The meanings derived from the Quran are supported by the *hadith* which contain narratives from the Prophet's (pbuh) life time. These were painstakingly collected through a rigorous process of authentication and validation known as the sciences of



*hadith* classification or *Mustalah al-hadith*. But disagreement remains. On the whole *Sunni* Muslims accept the authenticity of the *Sahih Sitta* or the six 'correct' books of *hadith*<sup>34</sup> out of which the *Sahih al-Bukhari* and the *Sahih Muslim* are sometimes known as the 'two authenticities' (Swarup 2002: 7). *Shii* Muslims have their own books, sometimes called the *Al-Kutub Al-Arb'ah* or 'the four books'.<sup>35</sup> In addition to these books both *Sunnis* and *Shiis* refer to other collections of *hadith* which are all open to interpretations and internal debates of the authoritativeness of different interpretations.

4. What about interpretations by individuals? Here El Fadl (2001) presents a coherent narrative, 'Muslims strive to discover the Divine Will but no one has the authority to lay an exclusive claim to it. In this context, one often encounters the famous report attributed to the Prophet, that if the *mujtahid*<sup>36</sup> is correct in his or her *ijtihad*<sup>37</sup>, he or she receives two bounties, and if he or she is wrong, he or she receives one. In other words one must try without fear of failure. [...] Islam rejects elitism and emphasizes that truth is equally accessible to all Muslims regardless of race class or gender. [...] because accountability is individual and no one may carry the burden of another.' (El Fadl, 2001:9)
5. But El Fadl also makes a point about the dilution of these notions of individuality and egalitarian accessibility which are considered important within the Muslim community but which also create anxieties about the dismantling of the authoritativeness of Islamic intellectual inheritance (2001). This problem he says, 'is exacerbated by concerns over the infiltration and dismantling of Islamic intellectual heritage by Western values and foreign systems of thought' (El Fadl 2001:11) which are apparent in Maududi's (1972) and other's anti-west stances.
6. When it comes to women's issues the problems are more than just sociological insensitivity towards women, rather these are to do with basic moral commitments and relationships between men and women and positions of social authority (El Fadl 2001).

To conclude this is a complicated area, I understand that there are individuals who would adhere to a particular scholar's opinion. There are others, at the other extreme, who value

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<sup>34</sup> (1) *Sahih al-Bukhari*, (2) *Sahih Muslim*, (3) *Muwatta al-Imam Malik*, (4) *Sunan Abu Dawud* or *Sahih Abu Dawud*, (5) *Sahih al-Tirmidhi*, (6) *Sahih an-Nisa'i*, and *Sahih Ibn Majah* or *Sunan Ibn Majah*.

<sup>35</sup> (1) *Kitab al-Kafi* of Kulayni, (2) *Man la yahduruhu al-Faqih* of Shaikh Saduq, (3) *Tahdhib al-Ahkam* by Abu Ja'far al-Tusi, and (4) *Al-Istibsar* by Abu Ja'far al-Tusi.

<sup>36</sup> One who exercises independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) in the interpretation of Islamic law (Esposito 2003)

<sup>37</sup> The exercise of independent or original analysis on legal issues



their independence alone. There are still others in between who may use scholarly opinion and also exercise their free judgement, juxtaposing both based on their own social circumstances and understanding of the matter that is being interpreted or on which advice is sought.

This brings us back to the authentic voice. If authority is so contentious, then authenticity as defined by religious and / or individual and / or feminist and / or socio-political and / or some other authority is as contentious. Nevertheless there is scope within Islamic theological discourse (as demonstrated above) and indeed in feminist discourse (giving voice to the other) for different voices to coexist as equally authentic or equally authoritative based on the individual's determination of his or her circumstances. To me this means that multiple voices become authentic in their rendition of *their* experiences and interpretations.

### 1.4 The *Muslimah's* Voice?

My reading for this chapter confirmed that Muslim women were mis-voiced or un-voiced in almost all discourses surrounding their life. While the authenticity of various voices remains problematic, it was clear to me that she needed to and could voice herself. I developed a framework within this research which encouraged *giving* voice to her, for her to *take* voice and also explore the effects of her voice being *heard*. There were three overlapping areas that my research would address:

- There was a need for greater engagement and cross-fertilisation between Islamic outlooks that were emancipatory towards women and feminist outlooks that contextualised the difference of the different other. I believe Muslim women's struggles can be interpolated at this point of intersection between demands for women's rights through theological and feminist arguments. But for this to be achieved her voice needs to be heard.
- Muslim women need to reclaim the processes of knowledge formation and dissemination. This is a feminist objective which needs to be articulated within frame-works of belief and faith. Religiosity is difficult to define and / or measure but it can be experienced by men and women who believe. This religious and feminist voice needs to be heard.
- The practising Muslim woman on account of her religiosity was the 'other' in increasingly secularised pluralist society. She is also the 'other' because she is a woman whom society does not perceive as adhering to the norms of liberated womanhood – for example she wears a *hijab* in a society that understands various



forms of veiling as a sign of woman's subjection (Daly 1985). I believe the Muslim woman's voice can confront and contest these perceptions.

These 'gaps' that this research fills by giving voice to Muslim women are symptomatic of the three-way disconnection I wrote about in the Introduction – although Islamic foundational texts ordain various rights for Muslim women, they are marginalised by patriarchal interpretations of these texts that are evident in some literature (Wife of Zarif Ahmed Thanvi 1999; Khan 1995; Maududi 1972; Thanvi 1905). They are also marginalised by pluralist society's suspicions of religion that could lead to preconceived notions of Muslim women evident in 'Airport' literature and some sections of feminist literature including by writers who are Muslim women (Sultan 2009; Hirsi Ali 2006). Mohja Kahf in her exploration of historical western representations of Muslim women questions how myriad representations of Muslim women from the *termagant* Shakespearian shrew 'shrieking expletives from castle parapets' to 'matrons addressing the knighthood of Orange in banquet halls' were all replaced with the *odalisque* oppressed slave imagery of Muslim woman (1999: p. 176). Representation is key to my research too – I envision Muslim woman representing themselves and through their own narratives and voices challenging stereotypes and popular imagery of the oppressed Muslim women.

## 1.5 Methodological Choices

### 1.5.1 What I did not want to do...

Indu Menon's work (1979) is an example of research on uninvolved subjects who happen to be 'Muslim women'. She used statistics, collected in the south Indian state of Kerala to understand why Muslim women lagged behind the rest of the population in education. Her work is a good example of quantitative research; based on the statistics she collected she postulates four reasons for the backwardness of Muslim women in Kerala

1. Insistence on Religious Education
2. Practice of early marriage
3. Seclusion of Women
4. No socially defined occupational role for Muslim Women.

Menon's work was out-of-date, but nevertheless it was a useful place to start thinking about my methodology and the approaches that I wanted to use – did I want to do research that was *on* women or did I want to do research *by* women? Her purely quantitative work did not intend to understand the religious contexts of the women and made little mention of the women themselves. Secondly, methodologically the women were subjects in what was very clinical research. This was not an approach that I wanted to take.



### 1.5.2 What I will do...

After all the feminist readings that I had done, I structured my research plan using a participatory research approach rather than an approach where silent / mute subjects were observed through the researcher's lens. I wanted to empower participants as collaborators – co-participants who were working *with* me, the researcher, to attain the objectives of the research. This was the basic premise on which I based my research design.

My overarching research objective was to bring the voice of the Muslim woman into formal environs of academic research. Feminist epistemology with its focus on giving voice to the marginalised (Creswell 2003; Maynard 1994; Stanley 1990; Flax 1983) intrigued me. It can be described by its deconstruction and interrogation of traditional commitments to truth, objectivity and neutrality; its celebration of human diversity; its aim to bring about an emancipatory change; and its commitment to ethics and ethical concerns (Cohen *et al* 2000; Webb 2000). Feminist epistemology insists that the methodology I use will be reflexive and consciousness-raising for both researcher and research participants; it will be a collaborative effort – for the researcher, the participants and perhaps also other researchers and practitioners working in the same sector. The entire research process will have to be action-oriented - there will be a constant focus on initiating a change for the better for the marginalised group: Muslim women who are the focus of this research.

My research also has an overarching shade of pragmatism – an epistemological stance that is more concerned with the *problem* that is being investigated, rather than the *methods* being used to research it (Creswell 2003). Like feminism, pragmatism recognises the 'inescapability of perspective and the indissolubility of truth and action' (Kloppenber 1998: 42). Pragmatists therefore focus their attention on the research problem being investigated and try to understand its ramifications using pluralist approach which includes a variety of approaches and methods. They aim to derive knowledge about the research questions or find solutions to the research problem that are practical and doable in the real world.

The research tools - narrative interviews, themed group discussions, digital storytelling, focus groups and my auto-ethnographic voice - reflect the innovation, creativity and emotion that my epistemological choices insist I bring into my methodology, which I shall discuss in the two chapters that follow - two and three - and also in chapters four, ten and eleven where I will juxtapose my methods and my findings making them talk to each other. Through them I hope to bring to life within my research the stories of the young Muslim women who collaborated with me in this process of presenting a picture of their lives articulated by their own voices as opposed to the proxy voices that currently prevail.



## 1.6 Future Readings: The Journey goes on

As I complete this review of the literature, already new vistas open up, new expeditions and fresher understandings beckon. As I spoke to young Muslim women and empowered them to *tell* their stories, I realised that new understandings of the *Muslimah*, her struggles and her contexts emerged. The *Voices* section discusses some of these new understandings and contextualises relevant standpoints from the literature into discussions. There are other areas relevant to Muslim women's stories that are beyond the scope of this research, to which this research can contribute to by acting as a foundation for future research.

Throughout this thesis, methodological choices will have to be justified; further literature will have to be incorporated into arguments being set-up; and recommendations for on-going and future work will have to be contextualised, again within existing literature. It will be an iterative process for me as the writer and for you as the reader, at the end of which a new voicing of the *Muslimah* will be heard.



## **Section II**

**How did this Research Give *Voice* to Muslim Women?**



## CHAPTER 2

# Research Design - Giving Muslim Women a Voice

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### 2.1 Introduction

This research gives voice to Muslim women, and creates a framework for them to take voice and for their voice to be heard. By reinstating Muslim women as storytellers who tell their own story, I initiate alternative understandings of Muslim women that contribute to inter-community dialogue and challenge popular imagery of the oppressed Muslim woman. This research thus recognises and exposes Muslim women's agency in their own lives and also in pluralist society.

In the introduction and chapter one, I established the need for Muslim women to represent themselves. This current chapter on Research Design is the first of two chapters that lays out my research methodology. This chapter explores the epistemological frameworks and the methodological choices for this research. It sets the scene for the next chapter which brings theory and practice together, describing some of the challenges faced and the successes of this research model. This chapter justifies the research plan. The next chapter describes its implementation.

There is extensive research, academic literature and public debate about Islam and Muslims especially in Western contexts, so much so that some researchers report that Muslim communities are 'research weary' (Gurchathen & Thapar-Björkert 2008: 544) or 'exhausted by so much research that is about them rather than for them' (Alvi et al 2003: xv). There is however little reflection and discussion in academic literature about the methodologies that are best suited to doing research that engages with Muslims (Hopkins and Gale 2009). This research area is overtly politicised by 'Islam versus the West' debates and publicised by media preoccupations with the different 'Muslim' other. There are also increased methodological concerns around access, ethics, feedback and positionality that require the researcher's critical thinking and engagement, 'yet there has to date been little work exploring such issues' (Hopkins and Gale 2009: 229).

Here and in the next chapter I will address these issues as experienced in my research that gives voice to Muslim women in Britain. I address patriarchy's marginalisation of women and secularity's marginalisation of faith, in participants' realities that are contemporaneously



Islamic *and* Western using a methodology that engages with Muslims and people of other / no faith backgrounds, allaying insecurities on both sides. The process or *methodology* of 'giving voice', which has never been easy, becomes even more complicated by Islamophobia, diatribes against perceived 'Islamic terrorism' and by acts of violence. The authority and authenticity of voices which are a constant thread in this research remain a contested area, more so in these contexts. These are the underlying tensions that I have had to negotiate through my research and which I have to some extent, tried to overcome through my research design.

I have two objectives for this research methodology section, first to clarify why I chose the methods I used and their competence to deal with the issues surrounding marginality and sensitivity that pervade this research area. Secondly I demonstrate that this is research **with** and **for** Muslim women and not just about them and the academic rigour that is possible in such a stance. There are many ways for a researcher to begin a justification of her methods (and yes this chapter had many false starts!). I have as Punch suggested already put my 'content horse' before my 'methods cart' (1998) in my contextualisation of this research in the previous chapters, now I shall plunge into the epistemologies and ontological stances that informed what I did.

## 2.2 Research Design: The First Steps

Research is about knowledge – new knowledge which must be built upon existing knowledge. Research is therefore a subset of epistemology which is the study of systems of knowledge. But then knowledge is based on experience (Rao 1968) – what is known and what is not known. Research is therefore also determined by the function of knowing – the researcher's ontological stance and choices. This relationship between knowledge, the known and the human knower inform the design of research and its outcomes. There are many ways to understand this relationship – as epistemology and ontological stances (Crotty 1998); as philosophical worldviews (Creswell 2003); or as inquiry paradigms (Guba & Lincoln 1989). Qualitative researchers must always spend a few pages describing their 'conceptual and analytic moves' leaving a trail that other researchers may follow (Huberman & Miles 2002). I call this research design and here I outline mine.

Crotty (1998) classifies epistemology as objectivism, constructivism and subjectivism on the basis of how meaning is inferred. Cohen *et al* (2000) on the other hand classify epistemology on the basis of the nature of the research – positivistic and anti-positivistic which takes into account human attitudes and behaviour. Creswell (2003) uses a different terminology. In his categorisation of epistemology or philosophical worldviews, which is his preferred term, in addition to postpositivism and constructivism, he includes advocacy/participatory/feminist as



an epistemology that advocates the cause of any marginalised group or section within a society and pragmatism that is problem centred and real-world practice oriented (p.6 -10). It is between these latter two stances, which incorporate elements of action research, that I found myself positioning this research. As my thinking evolved I called my standpoint feminist-pragmatist epistemology, which incorporates both feminist and pragmatist paradigms but which is also greater than the sum of its parts.

### 2.2.1 Advocacy / Participatory / Feminist Epistemology

Practitioners working within this epistemology engage with individuals from any marginalised group; so that the subject of the research becomes a fully participating contributor to the research. Research from this perspective, through its agenda for reform, has the capability to change and affect the lives of the participants, the institutions within which individuals live and work and also the researcher's lives. Participants become collaborative partners in the research process and their 'voice' becomes the 'voice' of the research (Creswell 2003).

Creswell's advocacy/participatory approach also described as feminist epistemology (my preferred term) may be said to have its origins in early feminist models – research that was for, by and about women, from which it evolved into a way of viewing, addressing and interpreting knowledge in ways that were different from traditional methods of research. Feminist worldviews evolved in stages from an unwavering commitment to the universal notion of "woman" to an acknowledgement of the need to contextualise the diverse experiences and needs of all women into the male-dominated annals of social research (Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002; McDowell 1997; Afshar & Maynard 1994; Stanley 1990). It suggested a method of 'doing' and 'being' research that highlighted the contributions of women to the development of society (Webb 2000).

In the struggle for equality and rights for women, feminists realised that there was a need to review existing literary and scientific sources of knowledge that were created by and for dominant social groups and which were biased towards the interests of these groups. In this process of redefining and reclaiming knowledge for women, feminist researchers were empowered with the realisation and the means to further the cause of *any* marginalised group (not just women) who, like women, remained under-represented or mis-represented in traditional discourses of knowledge. Feminist epistemology has therefore grown to advocate not just emancipation for women but emancipation and rights for any *othered* group within society, who may be marginalised on account of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or age. According to Flax (1983):

Feminist philosophy thus represents the return of the oppressed, of the exposure of particular social roots of all apparently abstract and universal knowledge (p. 249) [...]



Feminism is a revolutionary theory and practice. It requires simultaneously an incorporation, negation and transformation of all human history, including existing philosophies (p. 271)

Feminist epistemology is not only characterised by women undertaking research on women, rather it is diverse and decentred. It can be best described by its deconstruction and interrogation of traditional commitments to truth, objectivity and neutrality; its celebration of human diversity; its aim to bring about an emancipatory change; and its commitment to ethics and ethical concerns (Cohen *et al* 2000; Webb 2000). The experiences of individuals, women and men, become inseparable from conceptions of knowledge hence making them 'knowers' (Harding 1987)

### 2.2.2 Pragmatist Epistemology

This commitment in feminist ontological stances to lived experiences leads to the second aspect of my philosophical stance. Pragmatism evolved as a response to the social and economic upheavals in late 19th century America. By focussing on 'the practical in action, the concrete in experience and the purposive in thought', pragmatism challenges traditional formulations of problems and knowledge (Rao 1968: 2). Three key early figures in pragmatist thinking were Charles Sanders Pierce (1839 - 1914), William James (1842 - 1910) and John Dewey (1859 - 1952) and although their perspectives varied considerably, together they form the basis of pragmatist thought (Creswell 2003; Rao 1968).

Within pragmatic worldviews ideas, philosophies, doctrines or actions become meaningful only through the practical consequences they have for individuals. The individual becomes the focal point at which knowledge becomes meaningful and is produced by virtue of the individual's experiences of knowledge and subsequently the consequences of such experience (Dewey 1958). Since individuals are located in particular social situations, research that is about and with individuals will also always need to be contextualised in those social and historical situations (Schutz 1954, Somekh *et al* 2005):

For the philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter; it is more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means.

(James 1916: 1)

Truth is a complicated concept that pragmatists have discussed at length (James 2008, Geyer 1914) and which is difficult to conceptualise in the limited scope of this research. Here I only briefly allude to these discussions for the purpose of clarifying my epistemological stance. The relationship between thought and action or doctrine and consequence is what determines truth, or falsity, again as pertaining to individuals and their respective contexts –



'ideas become true just in so far as they help us get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience' (James 1916: 58). The truth is what works with time (Creswell 2003); 'it is made by events' (James 1916: 201); and the value of truth is derived by its practical importance to a person or community (Rao 1968). Given the plurality of the construct 'truth', there are no theories that are absolute truths (Wiseman 1974), pragmatists claim that even the bio-physical laws of the 'pure' sciences are at best approximations (Rao 1968). To sum up for the pragmatist, 'the world is 'one in some respects, and 'many' in others' (William James cited in Rao 1968: 64).

I recognise from my survey of the literature that pragmatism may be linked to relativism. In my research, this risk is mitigated by the distinctness of multiple belief systems and ways of life that pervade this research process. Muslim participants and I practise a *din*, Islam, which is different from the beliefs and practices prevalent in non-Muslim sections of British society, who may adhere to other faiths or to value-systems that are not directly faith-based. Within Muslim practice there is further heterogeneity in individuals' practice of their religion. Our faith systems give us unique standpoints and ontological stances, which characterise our opinions, identities and lives. This diversity of perspective is evident in a comment made by Nur Faezah, a Muslim woman and mathematics student who participated in this research.

*They look at the life of the Muslim from their own perspectives, and do not try and understand the Muslimah's perception of her life. [...] They do not have our religious values and hence do not understand our lives. [...] And then when they see Muslim women who are very religious, they see this as a contradiction with their perceptions of life and our perceptions of life.*

Nur Faezah, Warwick, November 2008

In this research I postulate a need to bring these various ways of life into dialogue with each other so that disagreements and insecurities may be discussed and *demythified*. Such dialogue may enable individuals and groups to see a larger picture of society to which they are all contributors, although some differences of opinion and tensions will remain, including the position faith in an increasingly secularised world.

We may agree to disagree over certain issues, although at the very least, we should be able to disagree and still remain partners in the global village.

Katherine Bullock (2003: 229)

Rather than subscribe to any one philosophy, pragmatists thus embrace a pluralistic stance that gives them 'freedom' to subscribe to a paradigm of choices rather than align with any one paradigm. As an epistemology it is 'more concerned with the problem that is being investigated rather than the methods being used to research it' (Creswell 2003: 11) and will



approve of whatever methods are required to solve the problem at hand. 'Methodological orthodoxy is superseded by methodological appropriateness' (Patton 2002: 72).

## 2.3 Feminist-Pragmatist Epistemology > Feminism + Pragmatism

This research subscribes to feminist epistemology in its argument that Muslim women are marginalised on the one hand by patriarchy, and on the other by pluralist society's suspicion of the 'religious' different other. This is reflected in my feminist aim to give voice to Muslim women – who are collaborators in this research contributing towards the creation of an alternate knowledge-base about Muslim women. My emphasis on the necessity of exploring the perceptions of Muslim women from alternate perspectives; to demystify their lives and to make practical contributions to inter-community dialogue is pragmatic. It is grounded in the 'real' world concern of inter-community dialogue and believes that one way this can be achieved is through a feminist empowering of Muslim women enabling them to tell their own story. It acknowledges that there are different perspectives that understand Muslim women differently, but argues that these different perspectives need to engage with each other. There are feminist and pragmatist strands to my research, but there is more to feminist-pragmatist epistemology.

Feminist Research focuses on the *methods* that are used – they must be emancipatory and empowering, pragmatists on the other hand are less concerned with the methods that must be used – the *problem* must be solved using what ever methods required. By amalgamating both pragmatist and feminist epistemologies my ontological stance insists that the methodology used will include both consciousness-raising feminist methods and results-oriented pragmatist methods at the same time – bringing together the best of both paradigms. This may be a reflection of my own personality (on this research): I have experienced a number of ways of perceiving Muslims – as an outsider before I converted to Islam, as an insider after my conversion and more recently as an academic researcher. This hybrid philosophical worldview also stems from the need to answer questions that require:

- overlapping explorations of 'Muslim women issues' within multiple disciplines;
- which can be addressed only by using a variety of methods; and
- which results in work that does not fit into any one epistemological stance.

### 2.3.1 Feminist-Pragmatist Epistemology and Interdisciplinary Research

Muslim women's religious beliefs, their femininity, portrayals (including but not limited to media representations) and socio-cultural contexts must be incorporated in any exploration of Muslim women's lives. Formal academic disciplines are designed to channel and



streamline thought, but these disciplines and their practitioners can sometimes be blinkered to the experiences of individuals, limiting the ways in which they think.

This leads us to presumptions of authority and dominance that underpin discourses of knowledge and knowledge production. From a feminist perspective, if knowledge and 'systems of knowledge production' were created by and for dominant groups and are biased towards the interests of these groups, then these systems of knowledge production also become one of a myriad set of tools that consolidate the dominance of dominant groups. The question that I therefore ask is whether systems that were produced by and for the dominant 'marginalising' groups can be used to address problems of marginality. Can a person work in a system that s/he is trying to change? (Meiners and Fuller 2004) Lorde answered this question with a resounding 'never' (1984).

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.

Audre Lorde (1984:2)

I only partially agree with Lorde's nuanced criticism of the master's house. She challenges patriarchal models that structure maternity as the only power open to women (1984: 1-2). She also challenges what she felt was predominantly white feminist thought that refused to recognise the differences and interdependencies among women. I agree with Lorde that women's reclamation of knowledge will necessarily challenge and dismantle patriarchal and racist hegemonies. But I disagree that this also entails a dismantling of feminist thought. Black women's Womanist movements built their feminism (as did other third wave feminist movements) on foundations laid by earlier 'white-middle class' feminists and although these movements had different social and historical contexts, and articulations of rights, still many of their demands were based on universal feminist values of respect and justice for *all* women. From my feminist-pragmatist standpoint through dialogue, comparison and contrast, between diverse meanings and experiences of knowledge, new knowledge may be established. In Lorde's own words, 'divide and conquer must become define and empower' (1984: 2).

There is another aspect to Lorde's criticism – she challenges the Master's tools – 'the tools of a racist patriarchy that are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy' (1984:1). Here I agree with Lorde that the master's tools are not always sufficient to address the issues of marginalised groups. In academic research, the tools reflect the interests and purposes of the groups that designed them and may not always be relevant to other groups. For research that is about and for marginalised groups the tools must reflect their needs. This tendency to use tools differently, to construct new tools if need be and think out-of-the-



box, whatever that box maybe, is perhaps what underpins the evolution of human capability to think.

The French philosopher Ricoeur insisted that 'human thought must be able to choose to think beyond the limits of any one method or discipline' (Scott-Baumann 2009: 170-171). He believed that the tools we use will automatically affect the results we achieve. Thus feminist studies chose to evolve as an inter-disciplinary stance, in an attempt to overcome the fact that established academic disciplines could not adequately address women's issues. It then evolved into gender studies to address the blind-spots within itself. Similarly to address Muslim women's issues I have to challenge the blind spots within academic disciplines including feminist / women's / gender studies that do not recognise various aspects of Muslim women's realities. At the same time, I work within them to carve out a niche where Muslim women's lives may be understood.

Feminist thinkers have been concerned about blind-spots in established academic disciplines. Purvis for example writes that:

the multiplicity of international perspectives on women's history illustrates also that the recovery of women's past worldwide does not fit neatly in any one theoretical framework or approach'. June Purvis (1995: 15).

Some feminist researchers endorse pragmatism as an alternative to rigid and restrictive ways of traditional research standpoints and instead embrace approaches that are open-ended, anti-essentialist and experimental – 'the feminist conception of pragmatism extended beyond language to an awareness of the experience of people who were denied choices, or unnecessarily restricted in their choices, by prevailing assumptions and patterns of social relations' (Kloppenber 1998: 107). As a feminist-pragmatist I believe that to represent the experiences of individuals, the boundaries between academic disciplines should be porous enough to enable engagement and crossovers. Such dialogue between different academic disciplines will be able to influence how knowledge is thought about, processed and created.

### **2.3.2 Feminist-Pragmatist Epistemology and Religion**

For many Muslim women their religion and religious practice is an important aspect of their lives. There is a need, within academic research, to acknowledge religion and religious ideology – the believer's point of view (Bullock 2003), along with other parameters like race, culture, class and ethnicity, as defining and influencing social experience and reality. Religion and God consciousness is part of the social reality of a portion of the population who deem themselves to be religious (Izzi Dien 2007) and by pre-empting religion and faith-based discussions as being intangible and therefore external to formal sociological research, the objectives and findings of some academic research marginalise the viewpoints of the religious believer (Bullock 2003):



Religion as ideology was to show how its symbolic representation corresponds to some thing real (leaving aside any supernatural reference).

Bocock & Thompson (1985: 1)

Belief systems – whether those of formal religion or otherwise – were and still are indispensable in the choices and decisions individuals make about their lives (Jackson *et al* 2007) and influence individual's and group's interactions with each other. Even secular society with its denial of formal religion abides by social frameworks – codes and norms which are strictly followed. Secular society's universal condemnation of racism may be seen as an aspect of such a 'social framework' that determines relationships within a society. Some aspects of secular frameworks are influenced by the ethical, moral and epistemological impacts of religion and others are not, which indicates that religious values and secularism are not always 'fundamentally at odds' (Suleiman *et al* 2009: 31). There are possibilities at both ends of this dichotomy for dialogue although some disagreements will always remain.

It is at this postulated permeable membrane between religion and secularism that my feminist-pragmatist worldview insists I position this research. Such a membrane may always remain a possibility, but that should not stop the attempt. From a feminist perspective, in this research, I am working with a group of people who are often marginalised on account of their religiosity which is deemed different. A study of Muslim women who identify themselves as 'Muslim' would necessarily have to acknowledge this religiosity of the women if it is to make an authentic representation of their lives (Bullock 2003). I therefore contextualise the religion of this group in my exploration. From pragmatist standpoint, to achieve my objective of intercommunity dialogue I must involve the experiences of different communities – Muslims and others. I therefore work towards a pluralist ideal of sharing of knowledge and meaning 'because knowledge is the only way to eliminate misunderstandings between Muslims and non-Muslims' (Izzi Dien 2007: 254).

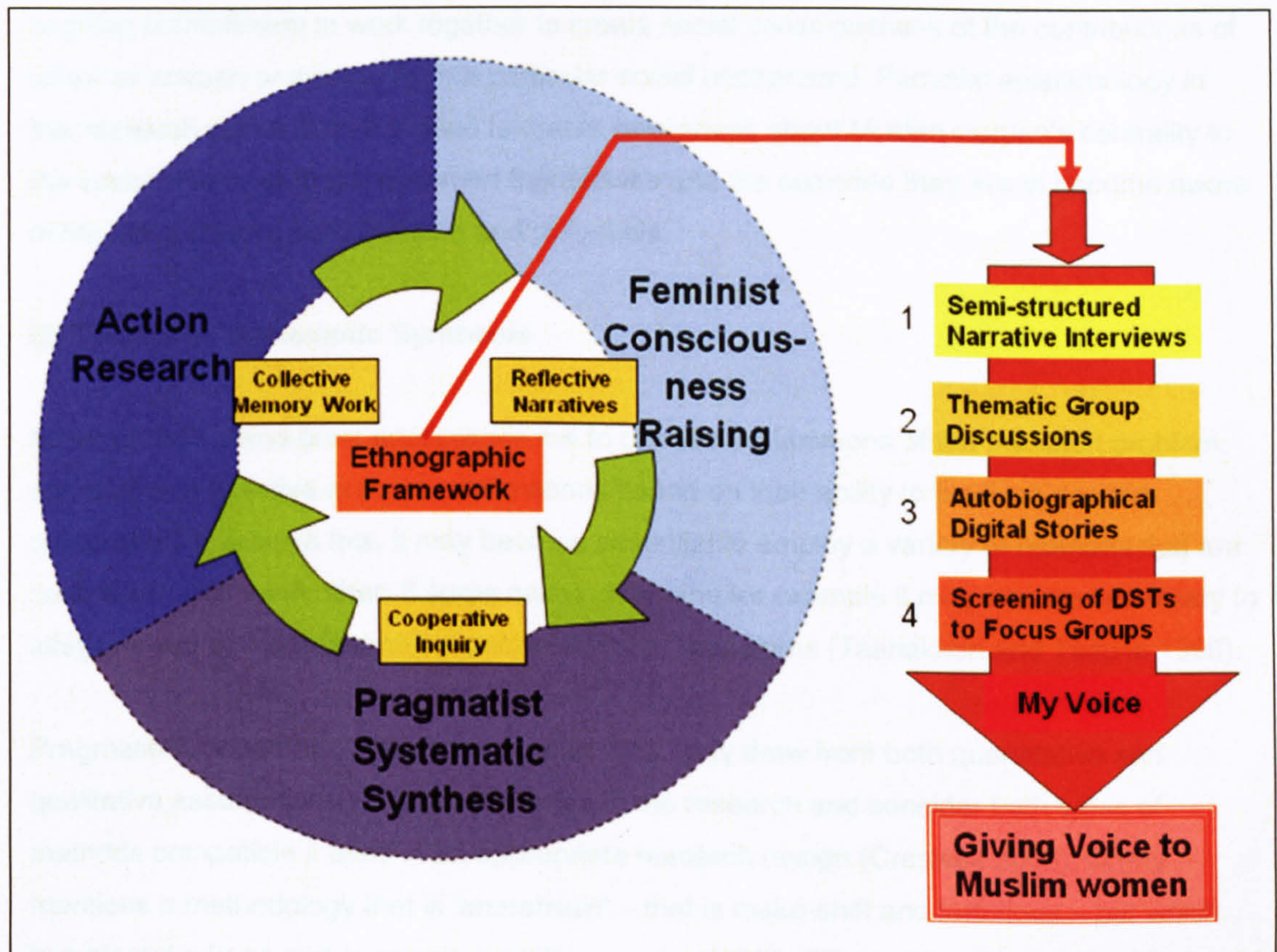
### **2.3.3 Feminist-Pragmatist Epistemology and a Methodology to 'Give Voice'**

There is some precedent for feminist researchers to use pragmatism as a philosophical paradigm to conduct their research. Stanlie (1993) for example writes about the 'humanistic visionary pragmatism of theorising by Black feminists' which sought the 'establishment of just societies where human rights are implemented with respect and dignity' and which encourage 'individual autonomy and development' (p. 3). Seigfried (1996) attests that 'feminist and pragmatist interest have historically converged and diverged' and calls for 'Cooperative Intelligence' (p. 259) that chooses a consensus path between feminism and pragmatism because 'social problems require concerted action to be solved equitably and efficaciously' (p. 275).



In such a stance there are possibilities for two-way conversations, negotiations and constructive critiques to explore how one might benefit from the other (Code 1998). In my research I work within a feminist-pragmatist ontological stance that is both feminist and pragmatist and is also a little more. In my work, three aspects of this stance are central to my methodological decisions as represented by the shaded blue wheel in Fig. 3 and which I describe below.

**Figure 3: Feminist-Pragmatist Methodology with Research Stages**



**(1) Feminist Consciousness-Raising**

Feminist methodologies are diverse and decentred and aim to capture the nuanced meanings hidden within stories being told by diverse voices. By giving voice to marginalised groups and individuals, feminist methods raise consciousness **about** these groups and by giving them a self-reflective voice, feminist methods raise the consciousness **of** these groups (hooks 2000a; Hogeland 1998; Stanley 1990; Shreve 1989; Morgan 1970). Indeed feminism itself is a consciousness that enables the world, including women, to recognise the contributions and needs of women in societies that even today occasionally silence women:

Living as we did - on the edge - we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focussed our attention



on the centre as well as the margin. We understood both. [...] Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center (*sic*) and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of the whole. bell hooks (2000b: xvi)

Although bell hooks wrote the above paragraph as a description of the social contexts from which black women's third-wave articulation of feminism evolved, this could be a description of the struggle of women from any background – white, black, Muslim, Christian – and their ongoing commitment to work together to create social consciousness of the contributions of either all women or women from a particular social background. Feminist epistemology in this research stems from the need to create awareness about Muslim women's centrality to the social whole, so that the women themselves and the societies they live in become aware of Muslim women's participations and potentials.

## **(2) Pragmatic Systematic Synthesis**

My pragmatic stand-point encourages me to choose explanations of the research problem; and methods to arrive at these explanations based on their ability to produce desired outcomes. To achieve this, it may become essential to employ a variety of methods that are compatible with each other. In some cases, like mine for example it may also be necessary to integrate two or more theoretical perspectives or paradigms (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998).

Pragmatists, based on their research objectives, may draw from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions when they engage in the research and consider both types of methods compatible if used in an appropriate research design (Creswell 2003). Crotty mentions a methodology that is 'anarchistic' – that is make-shift and fortuitous – but which has played a large part in science and its progress (1998: 37). I prefer 'Systematic Synthesis' coined by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) – a process by which the research process is built up, layer upon layer, each element fitting into the other so that rather than being anarchistic, the resulting research is a smooth progression of ideas, methods and answers.

## **(3) Action Research**

Action research is 'the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it' (Ellio 1981: 1). Action research has its critics and proponents and is alternatively described as the cutting-edge of research developments or not research at all. For this research project it has evolved from my ontological stance as a feminist-pragmatist researcher as well as from my research objectives which seek to give voice to Muslim women in order to promote inter-community dialogue. To give voice is not an externally controlled objective activity; rather it is a collaborative effort in which everybody works



together – me, other Muslim women and those who listened to their voices. Also to give voice is a process not an end – voice is given only if it is *heard*, else it has not been given. It requires ongoing commitment, engagement and cross fertilisation between the ‘giver of voice’, the ‘speaker’ and the listener, and between existing textual knowledge, individual experiential knowledge and everyday experience so that one may inform the other. This is where action research comes into my research – it integrates the processes of knowledge formation and application (in practice settings) so that ‘the development of practice and the construction of knowledge is a cyclical process’ (Noffke and Somekh 2005: 81).

Action research ties in with feminist research to ‘combat oppression’, ‘develop greater self-knowledge’, it encourages reflective research and by empowering the ‘researched’ to actively participate it addresses feminist concerns for social justice (Noffke and Somekh 2005: 82 - 83). Through a democratic and inclusive investigatory process, it can bring about transformative change (Greenwood and Morten 2007; O’Hanlon 2003). From a pragmatic point of view, action research attempts to extract meaning from the experiences of individuals. Action research is neither a method of data analysis nor is it characterized by specific methods, rather it integrates various methods in a methodologically consistent strategy (Altrichter 1993).

#### **2.3.4 Feminist - Pragmatist Epistemology and Authority**

Previously I mentioned presumptions of authority and dominance that assign hegemony to particular social groups over knowledge and / or knowledge production. This is a recurring issue in my research – whose is the authoritative voice? Feminist research focuses on the individual as a bearer of truth; on the truth as being relative to the reality of the individual and reality as being subjective. In this way feminist methodologies challenge traditional understandings of power, authority, authenticity and the researcher-researched hierarchy (Burns & Walker 2005). By positioning the previously unheard individual as the signifier of truth, feminist research vests authority in the individual making his or her story authentic. Pragmatism focuses on the experiences of individuals as a purveyor of knowledge. As it is individuals who experience the consequences of knowledge, authority is vested in them. They become active participants in the making of the world, capable of imposing their ideals and aspirations to better themselves, and the world in which they live (Rao 1968). This is a pluralist approach which by assigning authority recognises different standpoints even though they may disagree and by enabling dialogue between these standpoints gives agency.

So for this research with my feminist-pragmatist ontological stance the Muslim woman (in all her diversity) tells the most authoritative story of her life and in these contexts her voice becomes the most authentic. There are however further complexities, in *Talking Back* bell hooks writes about being praised for using ‘her ‘true, authentic voice’ whenever she read a



poem written in a 'particular dialect of southern black speech'. She was troubled by this 'insistence on finding one voice, one definitive style of writing' that fitted with static notions of identity and self (1989: 11). Individuals have many voices, society pressurises them to choose one. An authentic voice is then, not just an individual's voice but in order to be truly emancipatory, it would have to be an individual's *chosen voice*. This research hopes to give Muslim women authority to *choose* their authentic voice.

## **2.4 Feminist-Pragmatist Epistemology and my Muslim Feminist Ontology**

Feminist scholarship and activism may be considered as an epistemology, within which a variety of ontological stances are possible. Given the considerable diversity within feminist thought, it will be useful at this stage for me to clarify for the reader my understanding and practice of feminism as a philosophical worldview, which together with my Islamic faith will inevitably pervade my research practices and ethics. My feminist ontological stance complements my feminist methodological stance and together they enable me to structure my research as a collaborative consciousness-raising exercise to advocate the cause of any marginalised group.

Feminism in general terms may be understood as a struggle for women's emancipation for rights and respect (Watkins *et al* 1992). Some feminist texts define it as a struggle against various forms of patriarchy including religious patriarchy (Christ 1997; Daly 1986, 1985) or a struggle against universal patriarchy (Le Doeuff 1989). However emancipation and patriarchy are both complicated terms to define, that may be understood differently in varied social contexts. Concepts such as women's liberation, empowerment, freedom and gender equality which are usually associated with feminism, add further depth and diversity to understandings and practice of feminism. Here I shall try to develop understandings of these interrelated terms within the context of this research and my ontological stance as a practising Muslim woman and a feminist. My feminist-pragmatist philosophical standpoint is strongly linked to and rooted in the Islamic faith values and practices that research participants and I adhere to. Thus, as a pragmatist, I construct my understanding of feminist knowledge in its ability to influence and be influenced by the lives of those for whom it has consequences – in this case Muslim women. Such focus on the opinions and needs of specific groups of women is characteristic of third-wave feminisms which contextualise feminist knowledge in the social, cultural and philosophical contexts of the women they seek to emancipate.



### 2.4.1 Emancipation

I believe and often state in this thesis that Islam as a faith is inherently emancipatory towards women. Emancipation has different meanings that are derived from the social and philosophical contexts that it is being discussed in and the ontological standpoints of the discussants. I begin my discussion with the dictionary meaning of emancipation or to emancipate, which is the setting free of individuals from legal, social or political restrictions that may marginalise them or impede their progress.<sup>1</sup> Women's emancipation may then be understood as a process of removing obstacles and thus empowering women to attain their full potential. Part of this process is to empower women and indeed men through knowledge of social frameworks that may cause oppression or marginalisation (Le Doeuff 1998) – women must become knowers who are aware of knowledge and participate in its creation and dissemination.

As an aware Muslim woman, my readings of foundational Islamic texts – the Quran and the *sunnah* strengthen my belief that Islam as taught by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) frees women from pre-Islamic restrictions, enabling them to lead satisfied and complete lives. This emancipation values family structures and motherhood, positions men and women as different but equal and gives them complementary roles that are equally important to the development and future of society. Muslim men and women are equal before their Creator, are answerable to Him alone and equally rewarded for righteous deeds. Throughout Islamic history, this egalitarian attitude towards women as represented in the Quran, the example of the Prophet (pbuh) and in the writings of early Muslim thinkers has enabled Muslim women to have important social roles (Nadwi 2007; Bewley 2004). However not all Muslim women experience the Islamic ideal of emancipation. In some Muslim communities, women are denied access to education, economic activity, property rights often on the basis of the cultural values of these communities and these women are often not aware of what is assured to them in the Quran and *sunnah*. This is where a feminist struggle against universal patriarchy becomes relevant to the struggles and lives of Muslim women – there is a need to raise the consciousness of Muslim women and men about the emancipatory ideals that are encompassed within the Islamic faith.

### 2.4.2 Patriarchy

My feminist stance against patriarchy is not an anti-man stance; rather it is a pro-woman stance that through partnerships with men attempts to garner for women rights that have been denied to them. Patriarchy may be understood as a system of society in which men hold most or all of the power.<sup>2</sup> Feminist disagreements with patriarchy are that the unequal

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/emancipate?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/emancipate?view=uk)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/patriarchy?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/patriarchy?view=uk)



power relations it creates often deny women their rights in society, since the rights of men are given preference over the rights of women. For example, Le Doeuff (1998) argues that historically such patriarchy led to women being gradually marginalised from the processes and institutions of knowledge production and the suffragettes fought against patriarchal political structures that denied women political rights (Holton 1995; Pugh 1980). In the context of Muslim women's struggles it is evident that they had authoritative roles during the lifetime of the Prophet (pbuh) (Nadwi 2007; Bewley 2004), however as Islam diachronically spread across nations and cultures, many Muslim women lost their rights. In many cases this gradual corrosion of some Muslim women's rights may be ascribed to the patriarchy prevalent in their cultures and *not* from their religion – Islam.

I believe their religion as derived from the Quran and the *sunnah* is emancipatory. Muslim women do not for example, have to contend with a God that is portrayed as a male figure, something that feminists from other cultural backgrounds have felt the need to challenge (Carol 1997; Walker 1983; Daly 1970, 1986 & 1985). Allah or God Almighty, the supreme force as understood from Islamic texts is not gendered, neither male nor female and yet has both masculine and feminine attributes (Murad 1999). Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) although a man, is an egalitarian leader who always spoke about women's rights, sought women's advice, involved them in social causes and empowered women in different ways. A number of 'emancipated' *Muslimah* personalities continue to inspire Muslim women and men, including Bibi Maryam or the biblical Mary, Khadija, Ayesha and Fatima (may Allah be pleased with them all), just to mention a few.

The patriarchy that Muslim women challenge is not religious but is derived from the culture of Muslim communities. This cultural patriarchy can deny women access to education, careers and social authority, which ironically are rights Islam assures them. For example the Prophet (pbuh) allowed women to pray at mosques and also encouraged them to attend congregational prayers especially on important occasions like Eid.<sup>3</sup> However in many parts of the Indian subcontinent Muslim women are not allowed into mosques, a practice which is also prevalent in some British Muslim communities. On other occasions this cultural patriarchy misconstrues Islamic faith practices to become rigid and restrictive, for example the *hijab* which is code for modesty for both Muslim men and women, is imposed upon women, in some communities, as a practice that limits them to the domestic sphere. This practice sometimes called *pardah* limits a woman's social role, acting as a barrier between the woman and the society she inhabits. Such patriarchy is perpetuated by both men and women, in Muslim communities that obfuscate religious and cultural practices (Maududi 1972; Wife of Zarif Ali Thanvi 1999). It is such cultural patriarchy, which Muslim women

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<sup>3</sup> Sahih Bukhari Book 12: 824to 829



including my research participants and I hope to challenge. Through our interrogation of such patriarchal practices we hope to understand and practice Islam better.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.4.3 Liberty, Freedom and Giving of Voice

This brings us to another concept that is often associated with feminism – liberty that sometimes may synonymously be used to refer to freedom. Again as with the other terms discussed above there are many ways in which liberation may be understood – Walter for example questions a ‘connection that is often made between the liberated and the promiscuous lifestyle’ (2010: 96). According to Walter, although some feminist literature may ratify such an association, she also feels that this is not seen by all feminists as a source of power and liberation. So within this research, liberty then is understood not in terms of women’s liberation movements of the 1950s and 1960s or this association with promiscuity that Walter questions, rather like some third-wave Mujerista and Womanist movements, it is freedom that challenges mainstream feminist arguments for equality promulgating instead notions of gender complementarity as derived from the theologies of these women of faith. The women seek freedom to practice their faith in social frameworks which are free from patriarchy but which also involve men in the creation of shared knowledge and meaning. Such freedom to practise their faith and freedom as derived *from* their faith, gives believing women, whatever their religion strength to challenge both patriarchal interpretations of faith and secular notions of religious faith as backward or oppressive towards women. Thus women of faith through the faith find their voice and place in society. Afshar and Maynard eloquently capture this sentiment, which within a divinely ordained *Din* (way of life) furthers women’s emancipation and rights:

This form of Islamist feminism, with its emphasis on honour and gendered positions, has less interest in liberty, *rahayi*, which it distinguishes from freedom, *azadi*. Liberty in this context is equated with the absence of constraints which could make women into libertines. Thus, liberated women are seen as those who, having abandoned constraint, have escaped from one prison into another without understanding the meaning of freedom. Freedom here is defined as a conceptual quest for purity and for nobility of thought and action.

Haleh Afshar and Mary Maynard (2000: 812)

To go back to the example about access to Mosques, for some Muslim women their freedom may involve garnering access to worship in Mosques, something that is assured to them in foundational Islamic texts, just as is access to education, professional choices, marital choice and social authority. Muslim women may thus take voice to achieve this freedom to

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<sup>4</sup> This is discussed in more detail throughout Section III, especially in chapters 4 and 7.



worship either in their homes or in their mosques, a struggle which would be strengthened by the support of men. Such a struggle, by showcasing Muslim women's agency would also challenge notions of the oppressed-repressed Muslim woman. This example encapsulates the ethos of this research – struggle for rights as derived from foundational Islamic texts, involving men and a recognising the agency and voice of Muslim women. Thus the giving of voice to Muslim women that this research hopes to achieve, does not take a stance that is anti-men or that challenges Islamic values, rather it works within Islamic frameworks and with men to garner for Muslim women rights that culture rather than religion denies them.

## 2.5 A Methodology to Give Voice

My feminist-pragmatist methodology is informed by my epistemological and ontological choices. I will work within an ethnographic stance (Crotty 1998) that considers the life experiences of the researcher and the participants as central to the research process. I write about people who are '*meaning-makers*' and throughout this research I focus on 'people's interpretations of their world' (Goldbart and Hustler 2005: 16) – a better way to phrase this would be people's interpretations of our shared world. The methods I chose are based on three conceptual frameworks (represented by the green curved arrows and yellow boxes in Fig. 3):

1. **Reflective Narratives** that encourage narrators to think about their lives and then tell their life-stories. Narratives are important because although human beings build narratives around understandings of lived experience, the reverse is also possible – 'human beings live out their lives in ways that can be understood and communicated narratively' (Shacklock and Thorpe 2005: 157). So in order to challenge stereotypes of Muslim women, alternate narratives must be told and heard. This was the first conceptual framework that informed my choice of methods.
2. **Collaborative Research Models** that encourage shared ownership of the research, and of knowledge. From my discussion on epistemological stances the reader must already be aware of my stance on collaborative research work that may be described as feminist research or as action research and which through shared ownership empowers the research participants to be collaborators in the creation of new meaning.
3. **Collective Memory work** can be described in two ways, first as a research methodology used by Frigga Haug (Haug *et al* 1999; Schratz & Walker 1995). She used an iterative process of narratives, self-reflection and consciousness-raising to explore female sexuality as a social construct. Alternatively *Collective Memory* can be understood as a theoretical or philosophical concept that explores how human beings – individuals and groups – construct social meaning through their memories, and as a



corollary, by what they forget (Halbwachs 1941). In this research collective memory stems from my feminist-pragmatist commitment to reflective narratives and collaborative research models. My methods are different from Haug's but are informed by similar objectives and assumptions. Chapter four will discuss collective memory work in more detail relating it to research findings.

### 2.5.1 Tools for Emancipatory Research

My research is underpinned by my feminist-pragmatist philosophical stance and also by my methodological decision to use reflective narratives and collaborative work. Collective memory work acted as a framework to achieve my methodological goals. My research plan consisted of a four-stage ethnographic model to give voice to Muslim women (represented by the red arrow in Fig. 3). Each stage informed the next which resulted in data collection that was progressive:

1. **Semi-structured narrative interviews:** This gave participants the opportunity to share their opinions about matters that they felt were relevant to this research. Narratives captured the cultural milieu, social and personal attitudes that underpinned the narratives (Riessman 2002; Rubin & Rubin 1995; Wengraf 2001). Participants have mentioned to me that these interviews made them think about their roles in society. This constituted the first stage of collective memory work – self reflection was used to deconstruct dominant perceptions.
2. **Thematic Group Discussions:** I transcribed and analysed the women's narrations using qualitative analysis software NVivo7. I looked for patterns and common themes in what women said. My analysis resulted in seven main themes which I discussed with women during group discussions. While I undertook the analysis process (as opposed to Haug's model in which participants collectively analysed the data and which sometimes resulted in only dominant view-points being heard) women had the opportunity to discuss, validate or modify research findings. This constituted the second stage of collective memory work which gave participants the opportunity to talk about their shared experiences of being Muslim women. Chapters four to eight discuss the findings from stages 1 and 2 of the research. Please see appendix H for presentation used during group discussions.
3. **Creating Digital Stories (DSTs):** I assisted participants to create three minute long self-representational and autobiographical digital stories (DSTs). For DSTs a strong, well-formulated narrative is essential. This was the third stage of collective memory work – the participants created new narratives of Muslim-womanhood, that were initiated by their own and my desire to give voice to Muslim women and which were in part informed by the research discussions. This research stage is discussed in detail in chapter nine.



4. **Screening DSTs & Focus Group Discussions:** For the final stage of the research the women's stories were screened to three separate focus groups (Krueger & Casey 2000) consisting of individuals from different or no faith backgrounds. The focus groups were an opportunity to access the opinions of a collective rather than an individual (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990), and prevalent (mis)understandings about Muslim women were discussed, debated and challenged. I hoped that the new constructs as initiated by Muslim women's stories would break the conscious and unconscious linkages between perceptions of Muslim women and dominant media imagery. By initiating this discussion on perceptions of young Muslim women I hope to have initiated an emancipatory process leading to greater community cohesion and means to initiate future dialogue. This is discussed in detail in chapter ten.

The narrative vein running through my methodology is also expressed in my own narratives that captured my opinions as they fluctuated through the research process and as recorded in my research diary. As a Muslim woman, I realised that I was a part of the research rather than outside it (Ellis 2004). I was integral to my research subject – Muslim women; I experience the culture of my participants and live through a value system similar to theirs. 'My' story contributed to this research by adding a dimension of self-exploration and reflection to it. There was a danger in this stance of over-interpretation or that this research could become my story. I avoid this through my research design that involved participants at every stage asking for their involvement and valuing their feedback.

## 2.6 Ethical Concerns

Right from the earliest conceptualisation stages of this work, I was aware of the ethical concerns that I would need to address. All the women I spoke to, as intended were mature adults; they did not fit into the usual 'vulnerable' categories: young children, elderly, disabled, or people with learning difficulties (University Research Degrees Committee: 2008). However in the context of my research, the politicisation of the research area and sensitivities around gender, Islam and religious discourses made it necessary for me to seek ethical approval of the methodology being used as well as request ongoing ethical guidance on matters as they arose. I therefore took my work to the Research Ethics Sub-Committee (RESC) for ethical approval and their advice.

As a feminist researcher I involved participants as collaborators in the research process, so that they played a more involved role in the creation of new narratives of Muslim women (Goldbart & Hustler 2005). I shifted the traditional researcher-researched authority balance – participants now had more control over the research narrative and that came with responsibilities. I had envisaged that participants would share their opinions on sensitive



subjects like conflicting interpretations of women's rights in the *Shariah*<sup>5</sup> and feminism which to the lay-observer may seem incompatible, leading to misunderstanding of the researcher's objectives. Discussions about cultural influence in Muslim society and women's roles could be deemed as an intrusion into the established societal norms. To avoid these risks all interviews were held in safe institutional settings – the universities or Islamic institutes where the women work or study or other venues as suggested by participants.

Participants were interested in my work; my insider status as a Muslim who wore a *hijab* gained their confidence. After initial meetings, participants' included me in their social circles. I became a friend and a trusted confidant, which had ethical implications. They agreed with my research interests and were committed to my research objectives, to give voice to Muslim women. This affected their interactions with me and what they said during interviews. Women often spoke about personal aspects of their lives which they may not have narrated to another researcher, this contributed to my research but this also increased participants' vulnerability as they sometimes spoke of matters that had been silenced by themselves and by others (Barbour & Schostak 2005) including difficult personal struggles that they may have endured. I realised they may have second thoughts about what they said. As suggested by Research and Ethics Sub-Committee (RESC), I gave participants an opportunity to read interview transcripts and edit out anything they were uncomfortable with. Participants were also given the opportunity to be anonymous if they preferred it, withdraw from research at any stage and access to ongoing research findings.

For the digital storytelling stage (DST) participants were briefed about what a digital story entailed<sup>6</sup> and the ethical constraints that were involved. I briefed participants about *hijab* considerations that could arise from creating and screening digital stories. This ensured that participants only shared photos and experiences that they deemed appropriate and were comfortable sharing with a mixed audience of males and females.

I gave participants an information letter that contained all this information. Participants signed consent forms before they were interviewed for the first time. Any new participants at the group discussion stage also signed consent forms. In the DST stage the young women who created stories signed a special consent form that gave me the right to use their stories in my research. Finally focus group participants also signed a consent form. Samples of the invitation letter, all three consent forms and the ethics statement I presented to the Research Ethics Sub-Committee (RESC) are included in appendices A, B, C, D and E respectively.

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<sup>5</sup> God's eternal and immutable will for humanity, as expressed in the Quran and Muhammad's example (*Sunnah*), considered binding for all believers; ideal Islamic law.

<sup>6</sup> This is discussed in more detail in chapter nine.



## 2.7 Conclusion

I realise that giving voice to Muslim women and effecting positive changes in the ways that they are perceived is an enormous task, much beyond the scope of a formal three year doctoral research project. It will require a lifetime of commitment not just from me but from many like-minded individuals and communities. Nevertheless this research, together with work by others – Muslim or of other / no faith, male or female – is indicative of future possibilities. These methods represent my choices as a Muslim woman academic and the need for the research to be empowering and at the same time practicable, in *real* world situations. My methods are innovative because this is what my research calls for. Pragmatically they are grounded in the real life experiences of Muslim women and those who perceive them. They include a feminist element of caring and emotionality perhaps expressed through the personal involvement and commitment of all concerned with the research – researcher and researched (Fonow and Cook 1991). The research becomes a passion and personal goal for the researcher, and for the researched it is a personal commitment to the researcher so that together a slightly better, more just world may be achieved. In the next chapter I explore the practicalities of such a stance:

Achieving the co-operation necessary for social life requires "giving differences a chance to show themselves. The expression of difference is not only the right of the other person but is a means of enriching one's own life-experience"

John Dewey cited in (Kloppenber 1998: 102)



## CHAPTER 3

# Research Process: Experiencing the Research Design

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### 3.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters, the rationale, contexts and methodology for this research was clarified. This research was envisaged as a sequential process, in which each stage is underpinned by the immediate objective to give voice to young Muslim women and empower them, as well as empowering pluralist society through inter-community dialogue. To achieve this, the personal reflexive narratives of the women brought their voice to this research and also demystified their existence as 'normal' rather than 'exotic'. Collective memory was one of three overarching methodological frameworks within which we (participants and I – Muslim and not Muslim) attempted to challenge stereotypes and shake the edifice of remembered history<sup>1</sup> which constructed an oppressed-subjugated image of Muslim women (Kahf 1999).

Any new knowledge I hoped would be the understandings of the group – the result of a collaborative effort that I initiated, facilitated, recorded and also directed as part of my PhD work. I hope through this chapter to be able to introduce the practice of this research within the theoretical frameworks that I have already earlier set up in previous chapters. The very act of *doing* emancipatory feminist research was *being* the research (Webb 2000; Le Doeuff 1998) and I wanted this to be true not just for me as the researcher but also for participants, who were collaborators in creating new meanings and knowledge about their self and their identity. I hoped the research was an iterative process of self reflection and self recognition that achieved more than just its objectives at the end of the process. The research process, within itself and as it progressed, through its methodological focus on feminist methods and action research, initiated ongoing emancipation of the young Muslim women who participated. By encouraging them to think and then talk about their roles and contributions to society, participants were given voice. In the final two ethnographic stages, Muslim

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<sup>1</sup> I use 'remembered history' in the context of theorisation around collective memory (Halbwachs, 1941) as per which history of a social group or community is *constructed* out of memories that are remembered by that group and which contribute to the group's identity. Recollections that are tangential to the memory of the collective are forgotten – confined to the annals of forgotten history. 'Remembered history' is similar to Anderson's 'imagined communities' (2006) within which a group uses common symbols, language and commemorations to consolidate identity positions that are not real but 'imagined'.



women's agency is illustrated in their taking of voice to create digital stories and in the dialogue that was initiated as a result of these stories being heard.

My ontological stance as a feminist-pragmatist researcher made me aware that methodological choices were flexible enough to allow alterations based on my experiences during ethnographic work. I have had to make some purely pragmatic decisions, based on the logistical and other practical requirements. Other decisions were more difficult and required reading, self-reflection and consultation with my supervisors. It was decisions like these which occasionally made me alter plans and change strategies, which directed the flow of this research. Research-in-use has a completely different set of challenges as compared to research-in-theory (Miles and Huberman 2002). This chapter while drawing upon the theoretical frameworks for this research presented in previous chapters, will also describe the practical processes of entering communities, as a friend and researcher to facilitate achieving the objectives of this research. It describes the implementation of my research design.

### 3.2 Self-Reflection - My role as a Researcher

My role as a researcher is multi-layered, and often is a combination and permutation of the various roles that I have taken on through life. I am a convert to Islam, this gives me the passion to study aspects of a faith that I have chosen to believe in. My Catholic upbringing makes me see discourses surrounding inter-faith dialogue as real and of immediate relevance to life and society. My earlier career in Human Resources (HR) has inculcated in me the ability to engage with people, even if I was meeting them for the first time. My education in Physics brings to my work a well-defined structure and a mind trained to think analytically. This experience in the pure sciences also gave me solid faith in the objectivity and unbiased-ness of the researcher. This was initially a difficult mind-set to change – to me research that was not objective simply could not be *proper* research. Then I began to read about feminist research that was emancipatory through its unswerving commitment to give voice to the marginalised and *giving* voice implied giving context to, what were otherwise, meaningless facts and figures. A research subject therefore became a participant and a research observation became a person with emotions, feelings and opinions (Creswell 2003; Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002; Crotty 1998; McDowell 1997; Afshar & Maynard 1994; Stanley 1990; Flax 1983).

Ironically, a memory from years ago, as a student in a Physics laboratory, helped me understand the significance of perspective in research that is *with* human beings. I was conducting an experiment that required me to focus light through a lens on a fine metal wire some distance away, mounted on a scientific apparatus that enabled the investigator to very



accurately measure the distances between the three objects of the experiment – the light source, the metal wire and the lens. The experiment was straightforward, I completed the procedure, recorded my readings and then something important happened. I and a colleague decided to compare our findings and found that our measurements using the same source of light and same bit of wire were slightly different. So we requested our professor to adjudicate – only one of us could be right. He kindly set up and performed the experiment, only to get a third slightly different value! Either all three of us were wrong or there was a flaw somewhere. I later discovered the reason for this aberration; the three of us had different eyesight quality, and so as we performed the experiment, our eyesight, ever so infinitesimally, affected how we *perceived* the light, the wire and the point of focus, resulting in different readings. None of our readings were wrong, in fact they all were reasonably correct and drawing from this experiment I realised, that the pragmatist philosophers had a point (Rao 1968); even in the pure sciences there is room for the varied perceptions of different individuals.

This digressive story, my feminist-pragmatist epistemological stance and my own experiences as a Human Resource (HR) executive quickly converted me to the notion of the plurality of human perspective and its importance in sociological research. Physics was useful in one more way, it always provided a useful ice-breaker – participants were always curious to know how somebody who had wanted to be an astrophysicist was now doing a PhD on Muslim women.

During the first stage of the research, I noticed I often put on my HR hat. The process of visiting institutions and ‘recruiting’ participants was something I was familiar with from my earlier career in HR. The dynamics of initially meeting a group of people and then negotiating their participation in my project was akin to interviewing and then recruiting people to work in an organisation. The difference was that as an HR executive salary, career progression, and a brand name to work with, acted as motivation for those whom I recruited. For this research, I soon realised that the way to motivate participants was to share my passions and visions with them. Also in feminist tradition, rather than present the research as mine, I was constructing *my* passions and visions as the *shared* passions and needs of the group of women I was speaking to. My research therefore became part of a subject area which we *together* needed to study and speak about. In my previous HR role, I ‘sold’ the organisation to somebody I wanted to employ; similarly here I encouraged young women to participate in my research, by sharing with them *its* significance to *their* lives, and in terms that *they* understood. An excerpt from an e-mail I sent to students of the Ebrahim Community College requesting their participation in my research illustrates my efforts to structure the research so that it was about *them* or more precisely it was about *us*.



*“Dear sisters, I think it is important that as Muslim women we follow the examples set for us by the Ummahat-al Mu’minim<sup>2</sup> and the lady Sahaba<sup>3</sup> (may Allah’s blessings and mercy be upon them all) and not just acquire but also spread balanced understandings of Islam and Muslims in our communities and work-places. Of course we maintain our Islamic limits and values always and without compromise, InshaAllah.<sup>4</sup> It is from this perspective that I am doing this research and request your help and participation in my work.”*

Excerpt from e-mail dated: 13<sup>th</sup> Jan 2009

When I first spoke to participants, I told them about my personal passions and reasons for doing this work. First contact with participants was either a one-to-one conversation or where possible I spoke to a group of young women, but I almost always introduced myself first as a person and then as a researcher. Perhaps the Human Resource (HR) executive made prospective ‘interview candidates’ comfortable, easing their nervousness and making them see the interviewer as a person, or this could be the feminist researcher in me, not just *doing* research but *being* it as well (Webb 2000; Le Doeuff 1998). I wanted to know the life-stories of young women who agreed to participate in this research, but I would tell them my story first.

I also noticed that the target-driven corporate milieux, to which I was accustomed, continued to influence my plans and contingencies for this research. During research planning process I was aware that the long duration (approximately a year) I had allocated for field work implied that I could lose participants through the course of the research. I also anticipated women who chose to participate anonymously and would not be able to participate in the digital story telling (DST) stage.<sup>5</sup> I also realised that some participants may not want to participate in the DST stage for various reasons – *hijab* / modesty reasons; *hijab* of the voice which would imply that women would not like unrelated men to hear their voice; or general discomfort at sharing their images and stories with an unknown audience. I set myself a target of 45 initial participants (for the first stage of research), which averaged out to six or seven interviews at each institution. This was a figure that I always kept in mind when going out to visit an institution for the first time. It was not always possible to interview six or seven young women, but I was very pleased when I added up my numbers – I had spoken to 45 women – one target achieved! While I maintain that structuring the finer details (including number of participants) of my research plan was crucial for its success, I also realise that this

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<sup>2</sup> Translates to ‘Mothers of the believers’. This term refers to the wives of the Prophet Muhammad (May peace and blessings be upon him). These women were all leaders in their own rights and are well respected role models within the Muslim community

<sup>3</sup> Companions of the Prophet Muhammad (May peace and blessings be upon him)

<sup>4</sup> Translates to ‘God willing’. This term is often used by Muslims while referring to the future.

<sup>5</sup> I was partially wrong here as two participants used creative ways to create digital stories and maintain a degree of anonymity. Please see chapter 10 for the process of creating digital stories.



research is less about numbers and more about values and emotions – my own and those of the participants. It is the content of the stories that I heard, rather than the number of stories which shaped and informed this research project.

Two women chose to opt out of the research after initially letting me interview them – their opinions too are important. One woman opted out for purely personal reasons – she had recently converted to Islam and her Christian family was finding it difficult to come to terms with her Islamic faith. This had led to strained family relations and although she had the option to be anonymous, she felt uncomfortable to openly speak about her newly acquired faith. The other participant withdrew from the research after she realised that I am drawing upon feminism and feminist epistemology in my research. She disagreed with feminist discourses and thought it best to opt out. Her concerns were similar to my own earlier hesitations when I first read feminist texts. As the research progressed there was more attrition – as I had expected some participants chose to remain anonymous and considered themselves unable to participate in the DST stages; others moved to different cities; and for others changed life circumstances meant that they could no longer participate, all of which justified my initial plan for 45 participants. See table 1 for a detailed break-up of the total number of participants, those choosing to be anonymous, drop-outs and participants in DST stage.

At the end of the first stage of my research I had interviewed 45 young women who participated in this research – I hope many will remain friends for a long time. I have become very aware of the sisterhood, often described in feminist literature – women standing up for each other. I hope to be able to do justice in my research to the wonderful women I have spoken to, who trusted me, and who openly shared with me not just their opinions, but also their dreams, aspirations, challenges and frustrations. As is often the case in such participatory research, I came home emotionally, physically and ethically moved (Denzin 1971)

*[...] may it (my research) do justice to the amazing women I speak to.*

Research Diary, 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2008

### **3.3 Collaborative Meaning through the Researcher's Lens**

Often I found myself thinking about various facts and themes as they emerged. I was a participant-observer who observed a community by participating in it (Becker 1958) and from within environs it was most comfortable in. As a Muslim woman I was also an observing-participant who was already a part of the community I was researching (Altorki & Fawzi El-Solh 1988). As I met more women, in groups and individually, I also realised there was another facet to my relationship with participants – I was also an observed-participant – my



opinions affected participants' perceptions of me and my research. My research diary captures some of these thought processes as I journeyed through the same collective that I was hoping to demystify. I was trying to tell the story of young Muslim women, their struggles and their voice and this was my story too. As my research evolved, I realised that my research could not be structured as a one-sided exercise which presented recommendations that were devoid of their contexts. This research was about the existence and identity of a group of individuals, there was a need to give their original voices more room in the research (Schatz & Walker 1995). The research methodology that I developed, with its use of narratives and memory work, was inherently collaborative.

*I have been thinking a lot about the relationship I share with the participants in my research. I increasingly feel that 'collaborator' is a better term than 'participant'. I want to achieve an understanding that is articulated by Muslim women themselves.*

Research Diary, 29<sup>th</sup> May 2008.

This collaborative research model can be accused of blurring the lines between the researcher and the researched, thereby lacking in criticality. However there is an increasing awareness within sociological research of the successes of methods which give voice to the *researched* rather than to the *researcher* (Schatz & Walker 1995). Schatz for example asserts that;

Their common background is a strong quest for democratizing the research process. It is no longer the researcher's voice that should be heard but that of the subjects under study. Michael Schatz (1993: 180)

For my research objectives – empowering Muslim women and pluralist society – to be sustainable, it needed to encompass within itself more than the perceptions of one individual or only Muslim women. It needed to recognise the perceptions of different groups, and also bring their varied perceptions into dialogue with each other and thereby facilitate world views that are strengthened by diverse opinions.

I am also aware that I planned this research, conducted its processes and finally wrote this thesis. My lens and my voice present the discourses that constitute this research. A collaborative research model ensured that this research did not become my voice. During interviews, instead of a questionnaire, I used a virtual unwritten checklist<sup>6</sup> of subject areas that was based on my survey of the literature. When I briefed participants for their interview I summarised these subject-areas to them. This gave participants the freedom and opportunity to say what they wanted rather than what I wanted to hear, even if it was beyond the scope of my checklist. The second group discussion stage also acted as a check, giving participants a chance to discuss and comment on draft research findings.

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<sup>6</sup> Appendix F contains a sample interview brief from a research interview.



Finally, this collaborative research model also created issues surrounding ownership which cannot be fully answered. When Frigga Haug conducted her research on *Female Sexuality*, her research model required all analysis to be done collectively by all participants, which sometimes caused only dominant view-points in the group to be heard. The book that resulted from the research lists all 15 participants as co-authors (Haug *et al* 1999), though it is useful to note that the work is usually referred to as Frigga Haug's research. My research uses a similar but different model – to avoid problems that Haug encountered, I retain the responsibility to do the analysis of interviews. The task of writing the thesis also remains mine and as doctoral research this will lead to a PhD degree and a career as an academic. It was important to be transparent with participants about the shared and unshared aspects of this work. I considered acknowledging the contributions of all participants by name, but cannot do so due to issues surrounding anonymity and confidentiality.

### 3.4 Research Stage 1: Semi-structured Narrative Interviews - Individual Voices

Based on my supervisor's professional contacts and my own linkages I suggested in my research proposal the names of seven institutions from where I would source<sup>7</sup> participants for my research. Three institutions specialise in Islamic studies, but offer three different perspectives on the study of Islam which I shall briefly discuss through the following paragraphs. The other four institutions are universities where I contacted participants through Student Islamic Societies (ISoc). The women I spoke to at these institutions are studying various university courses ranging from undergraduate courses to PhDs. However the backgrounds, cultures and value systems of these women varied. The Coventry University women for example commented that participants from the more prestigious Warwick University<sup>8</sup> were 'posh London girls'.

One possible critique of my selection mechanism was that this sample is not fully representative of all Muslim women – the specific concern could be that by recruiting participants at university prayer rooms I would not be able to give voice to the women who did not use prayer room facilities. It is a criticism that I partially accept. However I did not set out to represent all Muslim women in Britain; that would be logistically and practically beyond the scope of a doctoral project. To be able to do justice to the heterogeneity among Muslim women would require a much larger project, more funding and more man/woman-hours to do the research. I set out to represent young educated Muslim women who were *visibly* Muslim (Tarlo 2010) because of their adherence to Islamic faith practices including, but not limited to the *hijab*. As mentioned in the introduction chapter these women may be called practising Muslims, *pratiquants* who pray regularly, as distinguished from *croyants* who

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<sup>7</sup> My use of the word 'source' reflects my HR background.

<sup>8</sup> Which is only a 20 minute drive away and geographically is actually in Coventry.



believe in the tenets of Islam, may fast and eat only *halal* meat,<sup>9</sup> but who are otherwise not regularly observant of Islamic faith practices (Bowen 2007). Humaira, a supply teacher and a research participant who did *not* wear the Hijab, illustrates this distinction between visible Muslim women and others

*When I work in schools with English people, most of them think of Muslim women, as wearing a hijab – “Muslim ladies always wear a hijab”. And sometimes they look at my name (Mrs. Khan) and are like “Oh! Are you Muslim?” I guess I look different from what is their perception of Muslim women. [...] To them it [not wearing the hijab] may symbolise that all women who are not wearing hijab are not Muslim.*

Humaira, Loughborough, July 2008

*Pratiquants*, more so than the *croyants*, have to contend with the stereotypes that are ascribed to the category Muslim women. Tarlo in her analysis of Islamic dress writes about the uncritical and misrepresentative use of images of visible Muslim women in popular mainstream media which undoubtedly feeds and sustains negative perceptions of British Muslims as alien, backwards, suspicious and threatening (Tarlo 2010). This research envisages giving voice to such visible *Muslimahs*. Nevertheless this sample has still tapped into a diverse cross-section of Muslim women living in Britain including;

- Young Muslim women training to be *Alimahs*<sup>10</sup> at Ebrahim Community college, London
- Young women training for various professional careers including law, medicine, education, sports training, business, psychology and sciences
- Young professionals
- Full-time Mothers
- Women from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds – predominantly most participants were British of south Asian origin. Other cultures and sub-cultures include Arab, African, South East Asian and Western European women. The ethnic and cultural distribution of participants is a fair reflection of similar national statistics for the British Muslim population (Peach 2005)
- British citizens as well as recent migrants
- Overseas students in the UK for their studies
- Women from various denominational backgrounds, although this was not information that I actively sought or recorded

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<sup>9</sup> Meat that is slaughtered as per Islamic religious regulations

<sup>10</sup> *Alimahs* literally translates to Female Muslim Scholar. The male equivalents are called *Alims*. *Alims* and *Alimahs* undertake extensive theological training often lasting for up to 7 years. Training within Sunni South Asian streams of Islam follows the traditional *Darse Nizami* syllabus which is what some of the participants at Ebrahim Community College were studying. The theological training for all schools of thought within Islam would normally include Arabic Language, Urdu or Persian Language, Quran studies, *Hadith* studies, *Fiqh*, Law, *Tarbiyyah* (codes of conduct and behaviour) and inheritance law.



- Women whom I contacted through the Loughborough Islamic Society are a unique group because many of them are the wives of international doctoral students who are accompanying their husbands during their studies in the UK. These women hence add to the diversity within my sample selection as they are not in full-time education
- Three of the women I spoke to did not wear outward manifestations of *hijab*,<sup>11</sup> namely the headscarf. However these participants commented that they were modest in their dressing and in their own way adhered to Islamic principles of *hijab*
- Two women I spoke to wore the *niqab*<sup>12</sup>
- I also spoke to a few older women during the course of my research
- Three women are converts to Islam

**Table 1: Participants in each cohort**

S. No	Institution	Stage 1 Initial Interviews	Stage 2 Group Discussion*	Stage 3 Digital Storytelling	Participants Choosing to be anonymous	Participants choosing to opt out	Participants dropping out for various reasons **
1.	Al-Mahdi Institute of Islamic Studies	7	3 + 1	2	4	None	4
2.	Markfield Institute of Higher Education	5	3	1	1	None	2 ***
3.	Loughborough University	7	7 + 1	2	2	None	None
4.	Warwick University	6	5 + 4	2	1	1	1
5.	Coventry University	8	5	2	2	1	2
6.	University of Gloucestershire	6	3 + 1	1	1	None	3
7.	Ebrahim Community College	6	4	2	2	None	2
* During the group discussion stage, a few earlier participants for various reasons were unable to participate, but a few new participants joined after they were told about my research. These new participants are indicated by the number after the '+' sign							
** including moving to different towns for various reasons such as marriage; new jobs or increased work / study pressure; or being unavailable for other reasons.							
*** One interview, Sarvat Ujra's was lost due to a technical problem with my voice recorder. I made detailed notes of this interview							

<sup>11</sup> The term *hijab* often refers to the head scarf worn by Muslim women. However conceptually, it must be understood as a much wider religious belief which both men and women must practice. It includes within its remit lowering of the gaze and modest dressing. Chapter 6 discusses the *hijab* in more detail.

<sup>12</sup> The *niqab* is a piece of cloth used by some Muslim women to cover their face. For an explanation of the term *hijab*, please see previous foot note.



At all seven institutions, the processes of gaining access and building relationships presented challenges that were different. In the next paragraphs I will briefly describe the research process and my initial impressions and reactions, at all seven institutions, chronologically in the order in which I visited them:

1. Al-Mahdi Institute of Islamic Studies, Birmingham: Here students are taught Islamic sciences from a *Shii*<sup>13</sup> perspective. The young women I spoke to here are deeply religious and spoke of their motivations to do an Islamic theology course. Many wanted to learn more about their faith so as to improve their religious practice in everyday life. This was the first institution that I visited but the research process here was one of the most organised and streamlined; this was perhaps because my gatekeeper<sup>14</sup> principal Shazim Husayn has a hands-on approach to running the institution. Also these students had recently participated in another research project and hence were accustomed to research and had less of the fears and suspicions that I encountered at other institutions.

Though I did not plan it as a pilot study, being the first organisation I visited, it gave me the opportunity to trial my researcher's skills and fine-tune my methodology. It was here that I realised that purely unstructured interviews would not always work. Some participants liked the freedom to speak (one participant spoke for an hour and 29 minutes during her interview). But other women preferred being asked questions and hence the move in my research strategy, from unstructured interviews to semi-structured interviews. I still did not use a questionnaire but rather made up questions based on the flow of the conversation and my checklist of subject areas.

2. Markfield Institute of Higher Education, Markfield, Leicestershire: This institute teaches Islamic studies using pedagogic models that are similar to mainstream universities. Hence academic rigour and developing critical thought processes are skills that students acquire in addition to a faith-based understanding of Islam. Here Sarwat Ujra, an administrator organised interviews for me with students and staff including herself – she was and continues to be passionate about the Muslim woman's voice. The librarian at the institution is of Turkish origin and she mentioned moving to the UK after the headscarf-ban in Turkey. The Turkish ban meant that many young Turkish women had to move to other societies if they wanted to educate themselves or have careers, and practise their Islamic faith. This is a clear indication of the importance of faith and faith-based practices to young Muslim

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<sup>13</sup> The Shii are a branch of Islam.

<sup>14</sup> The gatekeeper at this institution, Shazim Husayn is the principal of the college introduced to me by my supervisor Dr. Alison Scott-Baumann. Alison also introduced me to gate keepers at Markfield Institution of Higher Education and Ebrahim Community College. She has gained the trust of key people at these institutions over several years of collaborative working.



women. To me this is also illustrative of the need to contextualise Islam into women's studies and research about Muslim women (Afshar & Maynard 1994, 2000).

3. Loughborough University, Loughborough, East Midlands: As mentioned earlier the young women I spoke to at Loughborough added value to my research for two reasons (1) contributing to the woman's voice like all other participants and (2) as a cohort of participants that are distinctly different from other cohorts. All except two of these women were the wives of international PhD students at Loughborough University. When I interviewed these women none were studying,<sup>15</sup> three had full-time jobs, some worked part-time and others were full-time mothers. Their opinions on the role and rights of Muslim women add a wider perspective to this research which is not captured in other cohorts.

As they struggle to balance their career and family responsibilities each of these women present case studies on the universality of a woman's struggle as she multi-tasks her way to possible success. It was also useful to observe the perceived conflict between women's faith-based understandings of an ideal role and the practical demands of everyday life. This was especially obvious when women spoke about their careers interfering in their familial and especially parenting duties. At the same time they realised that their jobs brought much-needed income into the family, and also gave them satisfaction and independence.

4. Warwick University, Coventry:<sup>16</sup> This was one of the most difficult groups to contact. My gatekeeper here gave me access to three participants, including herself. To find other participants, I had usually went to the prayer room and waited there for prospective young women to interview. I normally chose Fridays for this, as I knew that young women would take special efforts to visit the prayer room on Fridays for the *Salat al-Jumma*<sup>17</sup> prayer. The flip side of trying to source participants on Fridays was that women wanted to pray during prayer time and I could only introduce my work to women who arrived early.

I often arrived at the prayer room at around 8am on Fridays and then waited till the *Salat al-Jumma* prayer. This was sometimes frustrating, but at the same time gave me an opportunity to observe young Muslim women in an environment that is distinctly representative of the bridge between cultures that I want to achieve in my work. The prayer room at Warwick University is fully equipped to meet the needs of

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<sup>15</sup> One participant has gone back to university and is studying for a part-time degree in business management.

<sup>16</sup> Warwick University is located in Coventry.

<sup>17</sup> Friday congregational prayers



Muslim student worshippers. Here the 'secular' and sacred co-exist and share a mutual respect for each other. This is apparent in the environment within the prayer room – students who value their education and their prayer (during ethnographic work at the Warwick Islamic prayer room I was equally likely to find participants studying advanced mathematics or reading the Quran); and religious sermons that discuss both core Islamic values and also the challenges of higher education.

5. Coventry University, Coventry: At Coventry University I made e-mail contact with the Students Islamic Society Secretary – a young woman called Ashia. Ashia was an enthusiastic gatekeeper. She promised to support my work and went out of her way to get friends, colleagues and 'sisters'<sup>18</sup> to participate in my work. She sent an e-mail to all the female members of the Islamic Society; created and then put up posters about my work in the prayer room; and also spoke to sisters telling them about my work.

*[...] sounds like some excellent research and I shall want to be involved. [...] I shall forward your research information and see what kind of information I get. Because we are students, we have time limitations. Roughly, how long would each part of your research take, as in interviews or any questionnaires etc. I shall try to get 8 sisters by the end of this week and pass on their email & name inshaAllah<sup>19</sup> if they are willing.*

Excerpt from e-mail from Ashia dated: 11<sup>th</sup> November 2008.

6. University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham: As the then president of the Student Islamic Society, it was easy to find participants as I knew many of the Muslim students. However some of my methods were a little arbitrary,

*"I was walking across the quad to get to the learning centre when I saw this girl in a scarf. "Hey!" I thought to myself "target in sight!" I wished "Salam" to the slightly shocked young woman and said "Sis, I know this sounds slightly crazy but I am doing a PhD on Muslim women and can I interview you?" Eram<sup>20</sup> (I know her name now) surprisingly calm said "Yes you can but can I please know what you want to interview me about!"*

*This incident set me thinking about a few things (1) am I being silly about the targets I have set myself or am I enthusiastic about getting as wide a representation of Muslim women as is possible within my PhD (2) I sometimes find the support and trust that sisters have in me and my work overwhelming*

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<sup>18</sup> Muslim women often address each other as sister.

<sup>19</sup> If God wills

<sup>20</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



*and (3) do I have privileged access to Muslim women because I am Muslim myself and share their culture and etiquettes.”*

Research Diary, 14<sup>th</sup> January, 2009.

7. Ebrahim Community College, London: Students at this institution study traditional Islamic studies and some train to be Islamic scholars – *Alims* or *Alimahs*. At Ebrahim community college access was difficult. After more than a month since contacting the gatekeeper and still having had no contact from potential participants, I considered giving up

*“I have had no reply from Br Arman @ Ebrahim Community College, maybe I should consider finding some other institution to work with.”*

Research Diary, 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 2008.

The gatekeeper then decided to give me the e-mail IDs of eleven female students. I sent them an e-mail explaining my work, but had only two replies, and so sent another e-mail stressing the need for this work and how important it was for Muslim women to take control of their lives and issues surrounding representation. That evening I received a call from a student called Mallika, who had decided to help out. I visited the college the following Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> Jan 2009. These are some of my notes from that day:

*“I visited the young women at Ebrahim community college today. They are a diverse lot, literally - French-Moroccan, Italian revert, English revert, Daughter of a German revert mom and Pakistani dad and who has now married an Indian (!) and two British-Bangladeshis.*

*As always the sisters were hesitant to participate, but clarifying the purposes for this research [...] makes them want to participate. They are inspired by my work and think of it as being for the sake of Allah”*

Research Diary, 24<sup>th</sup> January, 2009.

### **3.5 Using NVivo7: Finding the Collective within Individual Voices**

I fully transcribed all the interviews (which was a difficult and time consuming task) and then analysed transcripts using NVivo7, a qualitative analysis software, which like all software comes with the caveat that it is the researcher who thinks, analyses and interprets the data and not the software. In this research, semi-structured interviews were used so that participants' opinions and views were not constrained in any way. NVivo7 was initially used as a tool to give structure to interview transcripts. Since interviews were loosely structured around a broad and flexible range of relevant subjects rather than a fixed questionnaire,



NVivo7 was especially useful to develop patterns and then categorise participants' responses into broad themes. This gave structure to unstructured interviews, preparing the narrations for analysis and identification of themes.

Historically qualitative analysis was a cumbersome task. Analysing interviews meant using coloured pens to code themes as they appeared in the text. This was a relatively simple stage, one that I also undertook before feeding my data into NVivo7. However finding themes in the data and then grouping bits of text / data under specific themes was more complicated. Oppenheim recommends duplicating data sets and coding frames and then assembling a code book and a punch book for coders to allocate codes to questionnaire responses (Oppenheim 1966). Another method involved duplicating data sets and then cutting duplicate copies to assemble data into themes and codes (Wiseman 1974).

This is where NVivo7 simplified tasks for me. After doing some pen and paper coding to get a feel for what participants were saying, I fed data into NVivo7 and continued manually coding in soft copy within the NVivo7 software suite. NVivo7 can also automatically code data using a function called 'query', however I found that this was not useful in my research as my interviews were unstructured. This function may work better with structured questionnaire-based qualitative data. Text based querying is another function that can automatically code data. It recognises words in the texts and then codes all references to that word under a specific codename. This also was not useful in my research due to unstructured nature of my data and also because participants' often referred to similar concepts differently.

Each code then became a node in NVivo7. I could group nodes into tree nodes that developed into my findings. This was an iterative process, some of which took place in my mind. Through trial and error I tried several layered treenode combinations to identify themes and patterns in what the women were saying. The final tree nodes were discussed with participants during the group discussion stage and informed the five 'Voices' chapters.

For example women's comments about *hijab* were all collated under the broad theme or 'tree node' *hijab*. Patterns and subthemes were identified within broad themes, for e.g. *hijab* as religious injunction; *hijab* as religious practice; *hijab* as symbolic of identity; modesty; etc. Figure 4 is a screenshot from NVivo7 that shows the 'Hijab' tree node and all its subthemes. These sub-themes were used to identify and inform the arguments that are now detailed in chapter six which discusses Muslim women's experiences of the *hijab*. Further details of the coding process and analysis in NVivo7 are available in appendix G.



**Figure 4: Screenshot from NVivo7 of 'Hijab' tree node**

Tree Nodes			
Name	Sources	References	
Hijab	0	0	
Hijab - Dialogic Tool	11	18	
Hijab - Faith Reasons	21	24	
Hijab and Choice	4	4	
Hijab and Comfort	4	14	
Hijab and Freedom	6	6	
Hijab and Identity	14	21	
Hijab and Male-gaze	11	14	
Hijab and Moderation	3	3	
Hijab and Modesty	14	27	
Hijab and Pride	4	11	
Hijab and Protection	12	55	
Hijab and Respect	10	11	
not wearing Hijab	3	4	
Started wearing hijab because friends or family wore it	4	4	
Started wearing it young (puberty) (parental influence)	5	5	

### 3.6 Research Stage 2: Themed Group Discussions - Collective Thinking

During analysis I looked for common threads in what the women had said. My analysis resulted in seven broad themes which I discussed with participants in groups (see appendix H for PowerPoint presentation that I used during group discussions). This gave them an opportunity to discuss, validate and critique the research findings. This constituted the second ethnographic stage of research. I had assumed that organising these group discussions would be easier than the first stage of research because participants would be more familiar with me and my research objectives. This proved to be a valid assumption; after completing the interviews I was no longer a strange researcher who had to convince participants to take part in her project. Since my first meeting with participants and subsequently during the course of interviews, I had become somebody who was known and trusted.

At least from this standpoint, group discussions were easier to organise. However other problems, especially getting the women together all at once proved difficult, especially women in Universities who often had conflicting class timetables. My earlier assumptions about participant attrition due to the long duration of staged ethnographic work also proved valid. All first stage participants were not always able to attend group discussions for various reasons, however other women whom I had not interviewed sometimes participated in group



discussions because a friend had mentioned this research to them and they were interested in the work I was doing. Table 1 contains the number of participants who participated in group discussions at each institution. This was indicative of the success of my initial efforts to portray my research to participants as a collaborative effort and participants' commitment levels – one young woman was so heavily pregnant that her husband had to escort her to the venue for the group discussion – she delivered a baby boy a few days later.

The group discussions gave the women an opportunity to think as a collective about constructs, meanings and experiences of being a Muslim woman. Sometimes they unanimously agreed upon certain aspects of the research findings, on other occasions there was some debate. I also used the group discussions to introduce participants to digital storytelling and its use in this research.

### **3.7 Research Stage 3: Creating Digital Stories (DSTs) – Taking Voice**

During the interviews and group discussion stage, my research acted as a platform to give voice to participants. For the third stage of research, I envisaged participants *taking* voice. I assisted women to create three minute long self-representational and autobiographical digital stories (DSTs). For DSTs a strong, well-formulated narrative is essential. This is the third stage of collective memory work – the participants created new narratives of Muslim-womanhood, that were initiated by their own and also my desire to give voice to Muslim women and which in part were informed by the research discussions.

The process of creating a digital story is consciousness-raising and emancipatory. The women who created DSTs chose to 'take voice' by choosing to create stories about themselves that would be screened to external audiences. They had to reflect upon their lives and then choose a subject for their story that challenged stereotypical imagery about Muslim women and also carried meaning which was accessible to people of other faiths. *They then had to tell their story.* There were challenges involved in this process for both researcher and researched. There were also lessons to be learnt. I will discuss this process of *taking voice* in chapter nine.

### **3.8 Research Stage 4: Focus Group Screenings of DSTs - Hearing the Other's Voice**

Young Muslim women's stories were screened to participants from other / no faith backgrounds during focus group discussions to explore changes in their attitudes towards Muslim women before and after watching the DSTs. By using new constructs of Muslim



women this research severed the conscious and unconscious linkages between individual's perceptions of Muslim women and dominant oppressed-subjugated and different other imagery and thus initiated alternate understandings. I involved an element of quantitative research by using an instrument based on a 5-point Likert scale<sup>21</sup> to measure changes in attitudes towards Muslim women before and after the screening. This quantitative data supplemented the qualitative data collated from the focus group discussions. Please see chapter ten for details of this stage.

### 3.9 Conclusion - An Emancipatory Research Process

As I mentioned in the beginning I had hoped for my envisaged research process to be emancipatory within itself as well as resulting in research objectives, which would facilitate greater understanding *of* and *between* communities. I met young Muslim women from different cultural backgrounds, ethnicities and *Aqidahs*<sup>22</sup> but what is important is that this research gave them the opportunity to share their opinions with somebody who was interested in listening to them. Women shared not just opinions that were directly relevant to my research but often shared emotions, told me about domestic matters, family or friends whom they missed. Sometimes women also saw in me an elder sister / counsellor figure who they could ask questions and whose answers would be sympathetic to their needs. They also saw me in some ways as a role model, who was balancing her Islam and her career and as a result a few participants have decided to pursue higher education.

The women have often admitted during interviews that they had not really thought about certain aspects of their life and that they were now thinking aloud about these aspects, during the course of the interview. They reflected on their roles in society and if they were doing enough to promote better understanding of their faith. Other women changed their opinions on some matters, occasionally during the course of the interview or more often as a consequence of the interview. Finally I hope that this research has made every participant think, rethink and see something in new light.

In many ways this research process has achieved the emancipatory outcomes that I had hoped it would. During the first stage I often asked participants how Muslim women could be made aware of their rights. They usually had suggestions surrounding education for Muslim women, especially about their rights from a religious perspective. Often women would also say that research *'like this'* (my research) would help emancipate them. I have often pondered about what *'like this'* means. It could mean research that actively listens to their

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<sup>21</sup> Appendix J contains a sample copy of the instrument I used

<sup>22</sup> Islamic creed or articles of faith. Quranic formulation includes belief in God, angels, prophets, scriptures, and the Day of Judgment.



voice. It could mean research that attempts to understand their perspectives and value-systems. It could mean research that is pragmatic. It could also mean research that was empowering women, giving them voice to question and contest patriarchy where it exists and it could mean much more. The next chapters four to eight constitute the *Voices* section where I present my findings of what Muslim women said when they were given voice. During her interview I asked Fatima, a full-time mother – what we could do about the fact that certain cultures use Islam as an excuse to deny women rights. This is her answer,

*I guess with this sort of research. Get Muslim women to be interviewed and share such research and interviews with the Muslim community. I am being interviewed for the first time!*

Fatima,<sup>23</sup> Loughborough, July 2008

She was *heard*, the Muslim woman was heard – this is perhaps the most important success that this research has achieved.

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<sup>23</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



## **Section III**

### **Muslim Women's *Voices***



## CHAPTER 4

## Islam versus Culture: The Muslim Woman's Voice

*“I do believe it is our role to make our voices heard”<sup>1</sup>*

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## 4.1 ‘Voices’

This research began as a vision to ‘give voice to Muslim women’ and thus recognise and publicise their agency. In the previous chapters I laid the foundation for this research by contextualising its objectives and justifying the epistemological and methodological choices that underpin and inform it. This ‘Voices’ section literally represents Muslim women’s voices – their opinions and interpretations on various subjects that they felt were relevant to their lives and which they discussed during the iterative process of this research. *Voices* also prepares the ground for the next digital storytelling stage of the research during which participants were encouraged to take voice and tell stories in a form that could challenge popular stereotyping of Muslim women. These two sections constitute the demystification of Muslim women that this research envisions and together represent a postulated permeable membrane that can exist between diverse communities, which can potentially encourage cross-fertilisation of ideas, values and opinions between different individuals and communities in pluralist society.

Each chapter in this section addresses different but interconnected aspects of Muslim women’s diverse realities, as they arose from my analysis of participants’ interview narratives using NVivo7. As part of my collaborative process, the themes that emerged from my analysis were discussed with participants to give them an opportunity to critique and validate these findings. These NVivo7 themes, as illustrated in figure 5, form the basis of the *Voices* section, either as separate chapters or as threads that are explored across all five *Voices* chapters. The themes encircled in red inform individual *Voices* chapters and the other three form discursive threads that are explored in all five chapters.<sup>2</sup>

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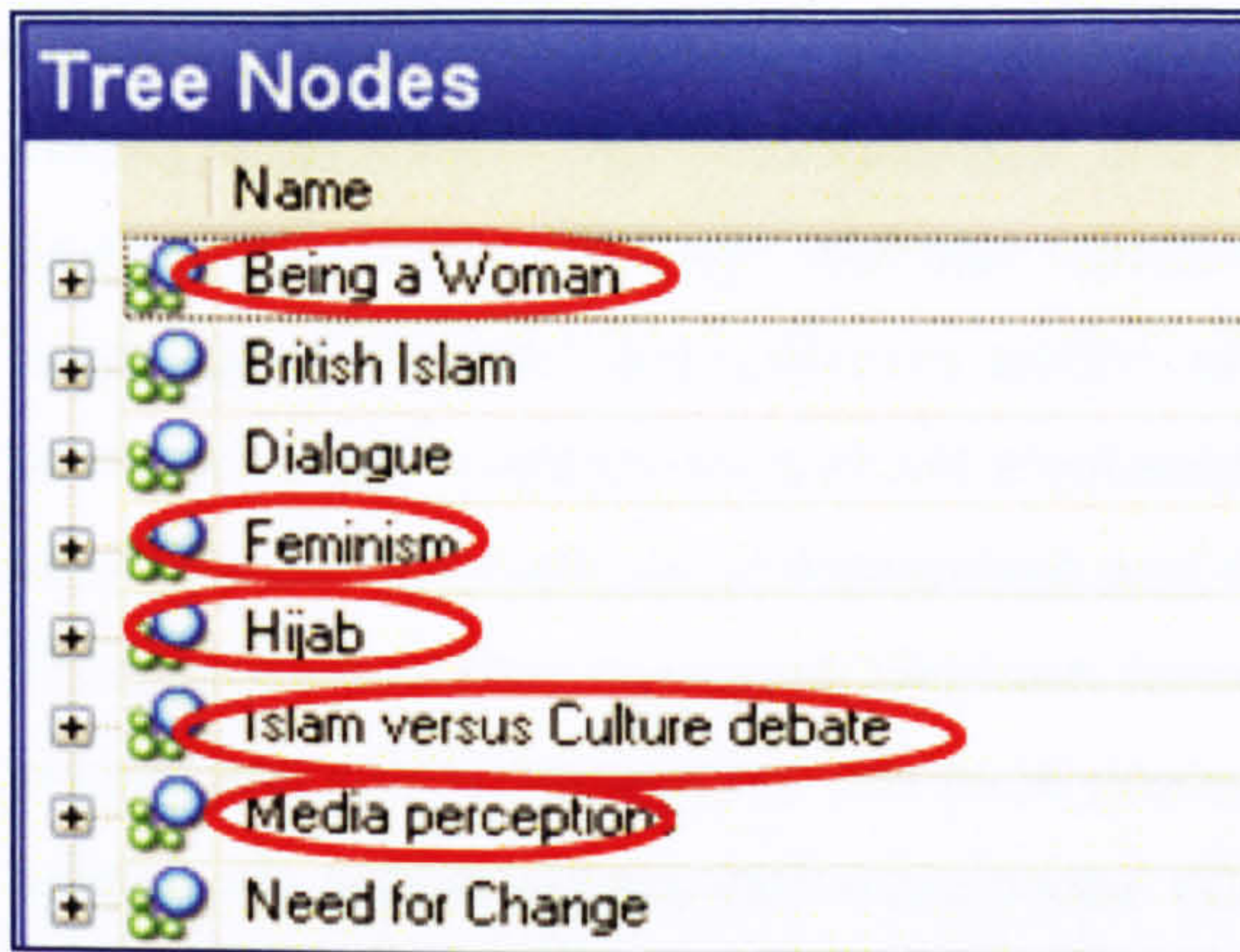
<sup>1</sup> Each chapter in the voices section is entitled using a comment said by one of the young Muslim women who participated in this research.

This comment was made by Shaila (name changed) a historian and history-teacher in London. She was studying Islamic studies when I first met her.

<sup>2</sup> Further details of the coding and analysis process in NVivo7 are available in appendix G and in chapter 3, sub-section 3.5



Figure 5: Screenshot of NVivo7 Treenodes



Together these chapters present new meanings of being a Muslim woman – a retelling told by Muslim women themselves, which fills the gap in existing literature with *their* voices – and are best read sequentially. The first voices chapter (chapter 4) explores the Islam versus culture debate as narrated by Muslim women in Britain. By contextualising collective memory work into the arguments being made, it clarifies collective memory work as a conceptual framework used in this research. It sets the stage for following four chapters which respectively discuss constructs of being a Muslim woman, the *hijab*, Islamic feminism and Muslim women's understandings of the media.

## 4.2 Collective Memory and the 'Culture' v/s 'Authentic' Islam debate

### 4.2.1 Haug's Collective Memory Work

I first came across collective memory work when I was introduced to Frigga Haug's work *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory* (Haug *et al* 1999)<sup>3</sup> – a publication which resulted from her research with 14 women. She used collective memory work as a framework to draw out the socio-cultural mechanisms that shaped women's understandings of the female body. The project, she says, rose from authors' unease with previous theories of socialisation. Girls (or women) were said to be accounted for by these theories, but never really seemed to have been part of their formulation and when they did appear they were mere objects of different social agencies – the family, the community, the patriarchal male figurehead and so on (Haug *et al* 1999). Like other feminist thinkers (Webb 2000; Le Doeuff 1998, 1989; Stanley 1990), Haug described women's gradually declining role in the processes of production and dissemination of knowledge and their marginalisation from social discourses. She saw a need for a 'bridge to span the gap between 'theory' and 'experience' '(Carter 1999: 14) which is similar to my feminist-pragmatist stance that relates knowledge to its consequences for individuals and their experiences.

<sup>3</sup> Thank you Dr. Malcolm MacLean



Her methodology may be described as an iterative process of self-reflective story-telling; consciousness-raising through group discussions with participants; retelling / rewriting the stories to reflect the new consciousness; and thereby initiating new constructs of the sexuality of women. Through reflective narratives she and her participants examined the meanings of the dominant collective which were imposed on individuals. Collective memory work was used to unpick the cultural mechanisms and male-dominated milieux that shaped women's own perceptions of themselves and influenced their constructs of female sexuality. Through participants' narratives alternate constructs were created, that were collectively shared and owned by women. Her book presents 'a novel combination of theory and collectively analysed personal experiences' (Grant 1993: 406) and her methodology typifies collaborative effort between the researcher and the researched. Haug's objectives and methodology were similar to mine – we both sought to empower our research participants to tell their stories, examine their own narratives and hence create and perpetuate new understandings of their self.

Although Haug and I, both ultimately give voice to women, there are differences between Haug's approach and mine. In my research I add another layer to emancipatory feminist discourse by contextualising a marginalised voice from *within* the sisterhood – the *Muslimah's* voice. My methodology is also different from Haug's model in its use of four ethnographic stages: (1) narrative interviews, (2) themed group discussions, (3) empowering women to take voice through self-representational digital stories, and (4) finally screening these stories to participants who were not Muslim. My methodology progressed from giving Muslim women a voice (stages 1 & 2), to them taking voice (stage 3), and this voice being heard (stage 4).

#### **4.2.2 Collective Memory Work and the Islam versus Culture debate**

Haug's model of collective memory work can be used as a framework to understand the appropriation of authority and dominance by particular social groups. In the context of this research on Muslim women, collective memory is useful to understand the distinction that many participants made between what they called 'culture' and 'authentic Islam', which is also evident in the literature (Bewley 1999; Engineer 1992; Pickthall 1926). During interviews and in group discussions participants asserted that Islam is inherently emancipatory, but that culture often denies Muslim women their rights. Firstly, patriarchal culture prevalent within many Muslim communities interprets faith in ways that can marginalise women. Secondly dominant secular culture prevalent in pluralist British society also marginalises Muslim women by dismissing the religiosity of Muslim women as a signifier of their oppression. It is somewhere between these two cultures that Muslim women lose their voices or *rather their voices are taken away from them:*



*I don't particularly like culture. My own culture, it's really patriarchal. But I hate how culture drives certain views into people and they carry that into generations. Culture sometimes asks you to do things which are against your religion, what do you do then?*

Shahida,<sup>4</sup> Coventry, November 2008

*You know how we are portrayed as oppressed. We are the one who have to wear the hijab and jilbab. They [pluralist society] think we are the oppressed ones.*

Ayesha,<sup>5</sup> London, January 2009

Within the Muslim community I believe there is a need to initiate a shift from cultural paradigms to those that are Islamic and emancipatory towards women (Engineer 1992). In pluralist society, there is a need to clarify ways through which Islam, other faiths and secularism can peacefully co-exist in spite of tensions and antagonistic standpoints. Collective memory work, by giving voice to Muslim women who have been silenced by dominant cultural and socio-political formations, can act as a framework for this discussion about the double marginalisation of Muslim women.

#### 4.2.3 Halbwachs' Collective Memory

Haug based her research partly on theorisation by Maurice Halbwachs who wrote about collective memory work in some detail (1941). He explores the relationships between individuals, their group affiliations and the dynamics within groups. This led him to theorise about collective memory as a socially constructed notion that endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people. It is individuals who remember not groups, but according to Halbwachs these individuals, by virtue of being located in a specific group context, draw on *this* context to remember the past and hence, interpret and enact the present. A group's memory, be it a nation, culture, or society and its meanings for the present are a reconstruction of how individuals within it interpret its past (Halbwachs 1941). When I asked Zakia, a research participant and mother of two, about patriarchal culture among Muslims she described its development as follows:

*"It [Patriarchal culture] developed from society; from the practice of people. For years and years people have been practising [in this way]. It has been passed on from generation to generation and that's what people start to think is religion. Rather than studying religion for itself, people start taking this culture as their religion."*

Zakia,<sup>6</sup> Birmingham, February 2008

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<sup>4</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>5</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>6</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



Halbwachs describes the thought processes of an individual and hence their opinions as a discursive contextualisation of her / his memories within her / his reality and relative to current facts. Hence when an individual thinks about something in the present, s/he relates the present to memories of past that clarify and remind the thinker of the meaning of the present. The past influences the present. So an individual knows that an apple is sweet because in the past s/he has eaten apples that are sweet. If given a choice between an apple and an orange s/he would choose the one s/he prefers based on earlier experiences of eating either fruit and memories of liking or disliking their taste. Further if the apple looked rotten, the individual would access those memories that told her / him that rotten-looking fruit were not safe to eat and must be avoided.

Each individual memory is hence a fresh reconstruction of a past image in terms of dynamic social environment in the present. Thus it is within the rhetoric of an individual's past (memories of experiences with apples) that his / her present is shaped (eating or not eating the apple). The past however is not preserved unchanged rather it is *reconstructed* in terms of the present dominant currents of social thought (Halbwachs 1941). Apples for example are perceived as the biblical forbidden fruit that Adam and Eve ate (peace be upon them both), even though neither the Bible<sup>7</sup> nor the Quran<sup>8</sup> mentions apples. During the course of remembered history apples came to be associated with whatever the forbidden fruit was and now are often remembered as the forbidden fruit especially as portrayed in popular imagery. To move away from apples, individuals may perceive Muslim women to be oppressed because dominant media portrays them as oppressed or highlight the stories of only those women who may be oppressed by patriarchy in the name of Islam.

*So these are totally two different things – what Islam says about a woman and what her culture says. And this is where the media has taken a negative image of women.*  
Nasim, Birmingham, February 2008

The past is determined by present stimulus which causes a cyclic process of recollection, reconstruction which requires actions and reactions in the present, and therefore initiates ramifications for the future (Halbwachs 1941). Thus collective frameworks of memory enable individuals to ascribe social significance to images and utterances that they come across (Wood 2006), creating a societal meta-structure which gives remembrances meaning and simultaneously creates the need for them to be recollected which, in turn, makes them memorable.<sup>9</sup> Thus patriarchal interpretations of foundational Islamic texts are often a

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<sup>7</sup> Bible: Genesis 2:17, King James version

<sup>8</sup> Holy Quran: Chapter 2 Verse 35

<sup>9</sup> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.  
Karl Marx (1852) cited in (Macdonald 2005: 74)



reaction to particular social and historical contexts including colonialism (El Fadl 2001; Bewley 1999).

Recollections that are tangential to the memory of the collective are forgotten – confined to annals of forgotten history. Temporal meanings assign fluidity to a society's constructs of its past – making history relative to what a society remembers or forgets. Thus 'remembered events' as recorded in a group's versions of history are often different from 'experienced events' (Portelli 1991: 1). French philosopher Ricoeur writes about versions of the past as being 'perspectival and selective', 'discrete events are selected as important and retold in the light of how they are interpreted' (Scott-Baumann 2009: 156). Similarly in patriarchal discourses, the scholarly or artistic prowess of Muslim women personalities of the past are not fully recollected, rather the focus is often on their spiritual and domestic strengths, for example Nusayba al-Ansariyya, the warrior *sahabiya* who fought in the battle of *Uhud*<sup>10</sup> is rarely mentioned in discussions about Muslim women role models (Bewley 1999).

Halbwachs (1941) implies the existence of an implicit preter-conscious mechanism of negotiation between the individual and the society s/he lives in – a constant state of play (Wood 2006) that shapes and sometimes distorts memories that produce social thought and stratification. The memory of the collective manifests itself on the individual (Halbwachs 1941) by defining the memories which must be remembered and those which must be forgotten, repressed or mutated. In the culture v/s Islam discourse, selective remembrance of the former becomes entrenched in people's practise of the latter:

*That's the thing – people don't have proper knowledge because it is so mixed in with culture, it becomes so hard to separate culture and religion and in some ways you can't because it is so deeply rooted in it.*

Nazeera,<sup>11</sup> Markfield, June 2008

#### **4.3 Collective Memory Work, Dominant Collectives & Reasonably Convincing Arguments**

Memory-work can be structured into feminist methodologies that are reflexive and consciousness-raising for both the researcher and the researched (Fonow and Cook 1991). However the researcher and the researched are part of the same collective – that determines and defines their thought processes and which conflates their thinking, identity and world-views. Since the 'insider' researcher and the researched both inhabit the same or

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<sup>10</sup> Battle fought in 625 against Muslims by Meccan forces

<sup>11</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



similar frameworks, the researcher cannot plausibly maintain the upright position of the objective scientific observer. The converse may also be argued – even when the frameworks of the researcher and the researched are diametrically different, objectivity is not possible because the 'outsider' researcher's opinion of the other is influenced, either negatively or positively, by one's philosophical framework. Finally in some cases events and phenomena may be better understood by the insider whose interpretations understand the research participants' everyday 'pattern of life' and contexts (Whyte 1981: xvi).

#### 4.3.1 Dominant Collectives and the Convert to Islam

According to Poston (2001), converts straddle both insider and outsider positions. Here I explore if this may be why many converts, including myself, question and write about culturally-accepted patriarchal norms and attitudes towards Muslim women that are prevalent within some Muslim communities. In the 1920s, Marmaduke Pickthall – an English convert criticised the practice of *pardah*<sup>12</sup> which limited a woman's role (Pickthall, 1926). Aisha Bewley (1999), a convert and a qualified Muslim scholar, questions many Muslim communities' focus on the *hijab* in discourses about women, rather than on critical issues like education and health for women. In other work Bewley uses 'well-concealed historical treasures' (2004: vii) about the publicly-active lives of Muslim women who lived in the past to re-assess misconceptions about Muslim women that are prevalent in Muslim communities today. Bullock (2003) writes about the veil in an attempt to dismiss stereotypical understandings of Muslim women. Macdonald, also a convert, explores white British convert women's experiences of Islamic feminism (2005). According to Khalilah, a Muslim by birth, converts often seem to ask the difficult questions:

*I think that people who come from outside are more inquisitive about Islam. They ask questions, and their questions ask about things that we never question ourselves. I met somebody a while ago and she was asking me questions and I thought I don't know the answer to that question because I've never asked my self that question.*

Khalilah,<sup>13</sup> Birmingham, February 2008

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to distinguish the term '*Purdah*' from the term '*hijab*'. *Hijab* consist of modesty guidelines for males and females as derived from the Quran and the *Sunnah*. The *hijab* as a concept includes dress code and also behavioural guidelines that Muslim men and women must adhere to. In western society the word *hijab* is used to describe the headscarf worn by Muslim women. *Purdah*, on the hand is term that is exclusively used for women. It literally translates to 'curtain' and in practice sets up a curtain between women and larger society. Women are encouraged to cover their faces and almost exclusively limit their movements and activities to within their homes. And if a woman must venture out she must be fully covered. This is an extreme interpretation of the *hijab* that is practiced in some communities in the Indian subcontinent – both Hindu and Muslim.

<sup>13</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



It may be that because converts enter Islam with cultural loyalties that are different from that of Muslims who are born into the faith, they are aware of the existence of Islamic foundational truths that are conducive to women's emancipation. They are also more aware of the marginalisation of these truths and can distinguish religion from what Rao calls 'historic incrustations' that are imposed by ethnocentrism (Rao 1968: 72). There seems to be evidence that converts can think outside Muslim cultural frameworks and hence bring alternative perspectives to these discourses – which may include aspects which have been forgotten. A white British convert I interviewed feels this causes problems for her, in how she is perceived within the Muslim community;

*Since I became a Muslim, I have had a lot of problems with other cultures. I am not blaming people but I find that they don't really understand me and I find I don't feel like I fit in anywhere. Everyone...umm... they are Muslims but they have their culture, like they are Arabs or they are Asians. The values that some men have in the way that they relate to me, maybe that's their understanding of women, I don't see it as an Islamic way, but they think that maybe I am wrong.*

Maryam,<sup>14</sup> London, January 2009

There is an overlap between culture and Islamic doctrine and the inability of some sections of the community (Muslim and others) to distinguish between the two which influences women's roles and rights in Muslim communities (Abdel Haleem 2003). This often came up in women's narratives. A young woman, the daughter of a German convert, in her interview recalls how when as a child, her family moved from Germany to Pakistan she was suddenly faced with an Islam that was suddenly *differently* cultural. The following is an excerpt from her interview;

*In Germany we grew up with reverts, all my Mum's friends were all reverts. So all the Muslims we knew were practising Muslims and they knew about Islam. We didn't grow up with a lot of cultural influence as such and then when we went to Pakistan, it was a complete cultural shock. This was the first time that we saw that not all Muslims practise [their faith]. A lot of culture came into Islam which we picked up and then had to unlearn again now [since she has moved to UK]. I didn't like that aspect of it. They have a lot of misconceptions and sometimes they don't know what Islam is and what is culture and the difference [between the two]."*

Safia H<sup>15</sup>, London, January 2009

There is a gap between Muslim culture and Islam that is discussed in literature (Bewley 2004, 1999; Engineer 1992). Converts seem to be sufficiently disconnected from Muslim

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<sup>14</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>15</sup> Three participants are named Safia or Safiya, to differentiate between them I initial the first letter of their surnames.



culture to recognise and try to address the issues that are a result of this overlap. This 'finding' about the convert's voice is not something I am certain about, but I am 'reasonably convinced' that this is an avenue for future research that requires wider exploration of the literature and also further ethnographic work with converts from different cultural backgrounds and converts who practise Islam differently.

#### **4.3.2 Dominant Collectives and 'Reasonably Convincing Arguments'**

In chapter three I used a memory of conducting a Physics experiment to illustrate (to myself and to the reader) that even scientific research contextualises the experimenter's perceptions and thoughts. Collective memory work may be used to further clarify this disagreement between objectivity and shared subjectivity that I use in this research. Bergson (1912) attempts to reconcile this apparent dichotomy between matter and memory; fact and perception; and scientific knowledge and perception as knowledge. Although his work is not specifically about collective memory he like Halbwachs (1941), makes arguments about the relationship between memory and perception, and the influence of the past on the present. This relationship between memory and perception enables understanding of how 'perception and matter are distinguished and how they coincide' (Bergson 1912: 76). If it were possible to eliminate all memory that qualifies a perception as ours, then that perception would pass into matter. Subject and object would unite in a *complete* picture – the subjective side being a contextualised perception of objective reality.

For research to be truly empowering it must present a complete picture that contextualises the perceptions of research participant's and those prevalent in their situational contexts. In this research I do not try to achieve objective answer/s, rather I attempt to present contextualised and 'reasonably convincing arguments' that can be acceptable to all the participants – Muslim and of other / no faith – who participated in this research. We undertook a journey together to challenge dominant frameworks that informed perceptions of Muslim women in Britain.

### **4.4 Using Collective Memory to Conceptualise**

Throughout this research I present young women's narrations and opinions. They speak about issues that were often revisited during interviews, subsequent discussions and throughout this thesis. Four such oft-repeated themes are identity; stereotypes; emancipatory feminist struggles; and giving voice to Muslim women in order to replace dominant but biased representations of Muslim women and their religious faith. The women's constructs of these themes will be discussed in various ways in later *Voices* chapters. Here I



use collective memory for an initial conceptualisation of these themes and to show the inherent interconnections between them.

#### 4.4.1 Collective Memory & Identity

Identification is a quintessential part of the mechanism of perpetual negotiation between the memory and intelligence of the individual, and that of the society. It is a function that is derived at the *permeable overlapping interface* between the individual and his / her social environs – an iterative process of evolution, change, adaptation, and transfer that is *manifest in* and simultaneously *relevant to* the times an individual lives in. The resultant identity is a reflection of the society or group on the individual, with which the individual consciously engages and invests in. An individual's identity is in constant negotiation with his/her history, language, culture, class, society and caste (Hall 1992). So a young Muslim woman living in Britain may be British and she may retain aspects of her ethnic culture. She also balances her Britishness and her culture with her Islamic faith. But Britishness, Islam and ethnic culture are all multifaceted. Britishness for participants may be an Orwellian construct that is 'somehow bound up in solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes' (Orwell 1947: 145) or it could be a more pluralist and prosaic curry and chips Britishness (Afshar 2008b). Social distinctions add to participants' identity, for example young women studying at Coventry University, felt that participants from the nearby Russell group<sup>16</sup> member, Warwick University would be 'posh London girls'. Participants' narratives surrounding identity, Britishness, ethnic culture and Islam are explored in chapter six.

Memories make individuals aware of past but also enable individuals to *identify* a past as their own. Collectives do not *as such* have memories of their own, but memories of individuals, which are a pre-condition of their membership within it, shape the memory of the collective. An individual's memory would project an 'I' onto the past, the memory of a group would project a 'we' whose history would be interpreted as 'ours' – a common, collective identity that the individual subscribes to. The identity of nation states for example are created out of, and strengthened by, a common national history, which is read and understood by the individual in a common national language (Poole 2008; Anderson 2006; Halbwachs 1941). A nation's celebration of national festivals; commemoration of its martyrs; war memorials (Halbwachs 1941); and history curricula at schools and universities (Osler 2009); are symbols of its efforts to reaffirm and sustain its identity. In chapter seven women's narratives of the *hijab* as a symbol of their negotiated identity are discussed.

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<sup>16</sup> The Russell Group is an 'Association of leading UK research-intensive universities committed to maintaining the highest standards of research, education and knowledge transfer' (Russell Group 2009).



#### 4.4.2 Collective Memory & Stereotypes

Identity is ambivalent. It changes as history brings different peoples and their cultures into dialogue with each other. As individuals interact with a myriad of stimuli from cultures, value-systems and understandings that are different, but yet *within* their own society, they have to constantly re-negotiate their group affiliations. Encounters between different groups can result in a society that celebrates differences, but can also induce suspicions and strengthen perceptions of the 'different other'. Societal differences when interpreted through lenses of the dominant groups can lead to marginalising of groups that do not conform to dominant stand-points. Recognition of 'a sense of us' stems from the fact that there is an 'other' who does things differently; subscribes to a different value system; follows a different set of social rules; and who is therefore *different* (Jenkins 2004). The collective recognises the need to protect itself from the influence of other groups and a need to set up barriers between *us* and *them* (Hinton 2000; Hussain 2004; Pickering 2001).

Stereotyping occurs at this interface between different groups, when any form of difference is recognised as diametrically set apart from the self-identity of the group who defines it. A stereotype may be understood as public information about social groups that is shared among individuals within a culture (Macrae *et al* 1996). Stereotypes can designate a community as the 'other' – implying the existence of two (or more) sets of individuals, cultures and value systems, one that is perceived as the norm while the other is marginal. They work to socially exclude a section of a society by reifying cultural variations into social boundaries and are defined both by the dominant culture as well as the minority group as boundary-maintaining moves inward (Pickering 2001).

Pickering (2001) like Halbwachs (1941) describes the *historicality* of human thought and human tendency to *relativise* history, which Pickering (2001) says contributes to the formation of stereotypes. He says historically located actors understand history through a process of comparison, categorisation and particularisation indicating an argumentative two-sidedness to human *or group* thinking that is opposed to each other. When this categorisation becomes *inferiorising* it leads to prejudice. Such prejudices or stereotypes are problematic because they create an incomplete and hence unfair picture of the stereotyped group (Adichie 2009). The fact that they are invariably created by other than the marginalised individuals, adds to their incompleteness. The stereotyping of Muslim women is evident in literature and in popular media. In chapter eight Muslim women interrogate media stereotypes and suggest replacing them with alternate narratives of Muslim women that they themselves articulate. I discuss this process of taking voice and creating stories that can replace and challenge inferiorising popular stereotypes including media imagery in Section IV on digital storytelling.



#### 4.4.3 Collective Memory, Feminist Emancipation & 'Giving voice'

The politics of memory and identity is invariably intertwined with power interests, dominance and resistance (Booth 2008; Jenkins 2004); social differences are often reified and exaggerated. If the collective memories that reify a particular social boundary are deconstructed into the forces, agendas, and policies which determine it, and which are determined *by* it, then it would be possible to untangle dominant memories from the frameworks of the collective. By disconnecting sociological commentaries from predominant interpretations of the past, new meanings may be read into history, based on facts and evidences that were till now repressed. It could become possible to reconcile the ideologies of the heretofore 'other', as a reconstruction of the past, in a context which is different to that of the dominant ideology, but which is nevertheless relevant to its context and the context of the othered group

Le Doeuff (1998) writes about the gradual and historical displacement of women from the processes of knowledge production. She argues that this marginalisation of women may be challenged through a 'feminism which thinks philosophically' and 'which seeks to address women and men together [...] to make human relations a little better' (Le Doeuff 1989: 17). In the context of Muslim women, Bewley (2004, 1999) mirrors Le Doeuff's sentiments. In her biographical dictionary of Muslim women (2004) she documents that the number of Muslim women scholars and Muslim women in positions of authority gradually decreased, drastically falling in the last 300 years. Elsewhere, she (1999) describes this as a consequence of a number of social factors including the resurgence of patriarchy and years of colonialism in many Islamic nations – social phenomena which may be changed through the empowerment of both Muslim men and women.

Discourse around difference, can become an opportunity to share knowledge about the beliefs and practices of social groups, without any stereotypes or prejudices. By giving the marginalised a chance to express their reasons and ideas, such discourse could enable them to break away from preconceptions they may hold about their *selves* and their identity. And give them their own voice to express what *they perceive as their reality*. This is feminist consciousness-raising or 'giving of voice' to women or any *othered* group within society. If the reasons for the marginalisation of any group can be explained as a result of the collective *forgetting* or misrepresenting the contributions of this group, then in theory emancipation may be achieved by deconstructing and then reconstructing collective memory to appropriately represent the marginalised group and its contributions.

So in feminist discourses patriarchy's domination is challenged by giving the marginalised – women – an opportunity to interrogate patriarchy's preferred understanding of women as limited to a 'fixed' domestic sphere and the effects of this understanding on women's lives.



Through an exploration of history, alternate understandings of the more public roles and successes of women, may be achieved. Through reflective action and taking of voice, these understandings may be translated into reality. Chapter 9 discusses Muslim women's feminist struggles:

*If there could be a strong voice, then most societies would change. If somebody becomes an example there is a possibility that others could change as well. And this change and such a Voice is essential. (my translation)<sup>17</sup>*

Nazneen, Loughborough, July 2008

## 4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have clarified the collective memory strand of my research methodology contextualising it in what participants said. It acted as a framework to analyse the tensions between foundational Islamic faith and the cultural practices of Muslims communities. Finally it was a tool to conceptualise three concepts – identity, stereotypes and feminist emancipation – that will be explored through Muslim women's narratives in the following chapters of this section and which are central to the arguments being made:

- Chapter five discusses Muslim women's roles in society including their roles as mentioned in Islamic scripture, their lives in British society and their hybrid identities.
- Chapter six explores participants' narratives of the *hijab*. Is it really a symbol of patriarchal subjugation or do Muslim women understand it differently?
- Chapter seven examines women's agreements and disagreements with Islamic feminism. How do Muslim women challenge the double marginalisation by patriarchal Muslim culture and by increasing secularisation?
- Chapter eight discusses women's opinions of the media in the light of stereotyping and the need for an alternative narrative.

Like their counterparts from other / no faith backgrounds these young Muslim women discuss their struggles as women and Muslims, contextualising their faith within their daily life and challenging patriarchy within Muslim communities as well as 'mainstream' secular rhetoric and conditions that are also patriarchal. Dominant collective memories on both sides of this dichotomy represent Muslim women without asking her how *she wants* to be

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<sup>17</sup> Nazneen chose to speak in Urdu. After I translated and transcribed her interview, I sent it back to Nazneen for correction and to edit it if need be.



portrayed. 'Airport literature' and popular media continue to present the oppressed and subjugated stereotypes of Muslim women. On the other hand Muslim male scholars strengthen these stereotypes and create some of their own by imposing culturally-grounded patriarchal interpretations of Islam upon Muslim women and their lives. These constructs of Muslim women limit women's roles in various ways, and conformity or nonconformity with these norms *others* Muslim women within different social contexts. The next *Voices* chapter gives voice to Muslim women to narrate their lived experiences, share their opinions and empowers them to challenge rigid constructs of the category 'Muslim women'.



## CHAPTER 5

## 'Constructing' Muslim Women

*"This is me as a Muslim woman"*<sup>1</sup>

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## 5.1 Introduction - 'Constructs' of Muslim Women?

This *Voices* section sets out to present new meanings of being a Muslim woman – a retelling told by the women themselves. This second *Voices* chapter explores constructs of Muslim women as experienced *by* Muslim women. A construct is 'an idea or theory containing various conceptual elements',<sup>2</sup> so what will a construct of a Muslim woman entail – what is a Muslim woman? This answer may seem straight forward – a person who is simultaneously Muslim and a woman is a Muslim woman. However this definition neither incorporates the different ways of being a Muslim nor the different ways of being a woman. There are also different ways of *perceiving* Muslim women which may not be linked to *being* a Muslim woman. I hope Muslim women's voices can replace predominant 'othered' imageries with complex and nuanced constructs based on their lived experiences of being Muslim women.

*This is me as a Muslim woman*

Samina, Markfield, June 2008

Badran distinguishes between Muslim women and the 'Muslimwoman'<sup>3</sup> which she feels is a construction that 'has limited utility and limited credibility – as Muslim women prove' (2008:106). It is the diversity in the lived experiences of Muslim women that many researchers fail to translate for their readers. There is a tendency to 'lump Muslim women together into one large group and view them as homogenous clones of one another' (Jawad 2003: 10). Muslim populations consist of diverse political positions and identities (Nagel and Staeheli 2009); they believe and practice their faith differently from each other and come from different ethno-cultural and social backgrounds. In the British context this diversity is all the more evident – the *Review of the Evidence Base on Faith Communities* conducted for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister reports that:

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<sup>1</sup> This is a quote from Samina's interview. She is a researcher working at The Islamic Foundation, Markfield.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/construct?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/construct?view=uk) accessed 12<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>3</sup> Badran intentionally writes 'Muslimwoman' without space to signify what has become a rigid label.



It is harder to draw as meaningful a set of generalisations about the Muslim population [than it is for other ethnic minority religious communities]. The [British] Muslim population is more of a confederation of ethno-religious components. Beckford *et al* (2006: 45).

In this chapter I want to explore the multiplicity of standpoints, aspirations and realities that are possible within the category 'Muslim woman':

*I am different from every single person who is walking on this planet. I am different from my best friend who is also a Muslim and who is also from an Asian community. Every single person differs in their own way. Everyone has their own values, their own way of thinking, speaking. There are also certain things that unite everybody in the world. We are all human; we have certain universal values, of what is right and wrong. There is too much emphasis on what it is that makes us different from these people and then there is too much emphasis to say we are exactly like you.*

Shaila,<sup>4</sup> London, January 2009

### 5.1.2 Fetishization of the Category 'Muslim women'

Young British Muslim women are a topic for public, media and academic debate in the UK (Dwyer and Shah 2009: 55). Nagel writes about the 'interest, attention and scrutiny' that Muslim women attract and also the 'reification' of the category 'Muslim woman' that reduces the 'identities and experiences of these women to their religious affiliation' (Nagel 2005: 5). Although she is concerned that work that presents a complicated and nuanced reading of Muslim women may further reify and legitimise the category, she nevertheless feels that such readings are important to challenge the stereotypes, negative representations and constant scrutiny that Muslim women must endure.

While I am cognizant of Nagel's concern I take the pragmatist stand that such research is a communication of an alternative way of knowing and experiencing life and that such communication is an 'ingredient of experience' (Rao 1968: 94) that can influence the perceptions of everybody including the perceptions that Muslim women hold of themselves. After having met and spoken to over 45 young women, I believe that their voices can constitute a retelling of Muslim women's stories that neither oversimplifies nor fetishizes the category 'Muslim woman' as distinct and different from the category 'woman'.

*So how then can Muslim women be any different as compared to other women or how can she be any less or more. What are her traits – faithfulness, religious, stays with her husband; she covers herself and yet manages a job, she also works towards the benefit of the community she lives in. So how is she different? I cannot understand this. (my translation)*

Fauzia,<sup>5</sup> Loughborough, July 2008

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<sup>4</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



Over-simplification loses the inherent diversity among Muslim women. Fetishization creates a construct of Muslim women that is too rigid, which fails to interrogate their diverse realities and hence positions them as diametrically different from 'women'. It is this that I seek to avoid, initiating instead flexibility in understandings of Muslim women. Participants' answers to a question as basic as "Why did you choose to participate in this research?" highlight some of the multifarious diversities among participants. One woman diagnosed with cancer felt that my research is a good cause that she wanted to support to earn the blessings of her Creator – this was something that she felt was important to do. Another woman, a psychology student, participates in as many research projects as she can and feels that such participation gives her valuable experience she can use when she runs her own research project. Incidentally, she also felt that this research project was the most interesting because it was about her and *involved* her to a larger extent than other projects. Another who had decided against participating in my research because she was too busy with coursework and who later changed her mind, said she decided to participate because:

*I will be doing something for Islam, for women and for whoever has misunderstood us in any way.*

Zeenat, Birmingham, February 2008

These are young women from very different cultures, socio-economic backgrounds and existences. For this research project, the 'fact' that they identify themselves as Muslims is a commonality that necessitates this exploration. This research accepts that Islam is only one common strand in the lives of participants and throughout the research I will try to remain aware of the number of other 'facts' that are essential to participants' identities and lived experiences. Although Muslim women are not homogeneous, there are similarities in their lived experiences that makes research, which contextualises their inherent diversity, worthwhile (Benn and Jawaad 2003).

## 5.2 The 'Muslim-ness' of a Woman

It is difficult to judge how to progress without either exaggerating or blurring the differences that necessitate me undertaking this research. The Oxford Dictionary defines the term 'Muslim' as a follower of Islam<sup>6</sup> which on the face of it is a simple place to begin. On the other hand Tariq Modood (2009: 193) rather succinctly writes, 'Muslims are not a

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<sup>5</sup> Fauzia (name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous) is studying for her MBA at Loughborough University. She chose to speak in Urdu during most parts of her interview. I translated and transcribed the interview. To ensure that my translation accurately reflected her words, as with all participants, I sent the interview transcript back to her for verification and also to edit out any sections of the interview she was uncomfortable with.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/muslim?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/muslim?view=uk)



homogenous group! Islam is not a monolithic whole; multifarious cultural, denominational, social and other differences emerge. During the research process participants recognised the shared Islamic values that they had in common with each other. Perhaps because this research sought to give voice to practising Muslim women – *pratiquants* (which as I explained earlier is a useful but reified category in itself!), women whom I spoke to were often aware of Islamic doctrine and spoke of it as influencing their choices and being part of their identity. By realising the need for this research they also gave their implicit approval to the category 'Muslim women' and its relevance for the purposes of 'giving voice'.

*I think you need to think about, perhaps all the different views that you have had and perhaps that one aspect that links us all together. It is going to be difficult because we have all got different views about what is the ideal situation but at the same time trying to pin-point what our initial spark is, for which I think evidently most of us are going to say Islam. This is our initial root.*

Noor, Cheltenham, January 2009

In the first stage of my research I used semi-structured narrative interviews where women could speak about whatever they wanted. The question "What does Islam mean to you?" was never directly answered nor was it asked, except in one case which I quote below. Since I am a Muslim woman too, there was often an implicit assumption that the Islamic contexts that answered this question were already in place. Participants nevertheless spoke in various ways about their reliance on their faith, and the spiritual strength that they gained from their faith which affected most aspects of their daily lives. It is this inner appreciation of the importance of religion to individuals who are essentially religious, that some writers fail to address. Benson and Stangroom (2009) in their book – *Does God Hate Women?* – explore various religions' stances on women. Typical of other books of similar content, they use in-depth analysis of heinous crimes against women to make arguments about the deep misogyny in most major world religions and particularly within Islam. In their overarching assumption that religion is *always* imposed upon women, they fail to see that many women *choose* to believe in God and lead religious lives.

This is where this research differs. Most young women I spoke to have explored their faith in various ways and have then chosen to practise it in ways that suited them. Forty two out of the 45 I spoke to were born into families that were Muslim, the remaining three were converts. All the women however described the journeys they undertook to find their faith position. They have chosen to live their life by Islamic principles as derived from the Quran and the *Sunnah*. This is how Basariah, a Muslim by birth described her faith:

*I would like to start with what Islam is and what it means to me. I think when people perceive Islam they over-complicate its beauty. I think it is not just about having to*



*pray five times or fasting. Those are fundamentals but I think it is essentially a way of life. It teaches you what is right and wrong and teaches you to lead your life as a dignified human being and to have a sense of what you're capable of. I think Islam really lifts you to achieve your potential. I think for me it means incorporating everything rather than taking the bits I agree with and neglecting others. If there is something I do not understand I research into it, talk about it, and understand it and then take it in my lifestyle.*

*I see Islam as submission to Allah which is what the word [Islam] means and to follow the message of the holy Prophet (pbuh). I see Islam as so simple that if you have love for Allah and his prophet (pbuh), then he loves you and essentially you are pleasing God. So that's how I view my religion and I think it's so beautiful because it gives you respect as an individual. It recognises your autonomy and your choice. It wants you to be able to take decisions, gain knowledge and it's a whole lifestyle – everything from your family, marriage, to wills [inheritance] - it's a package essentially. When you take Islam you must understand that you are taking the whole package and must understand the whole religion. This is our faith – submission to Allah and love for the holy prophet (pbuh). This is what I feel is the crux of Islam.*  
Basariah, Warwick, November, 2009

### **5.2.1 Islam and the Role of Women**

Although participants agreed that Islam was inherently emancipatory, participants had different understandings of what this emancipation may be. Their arguments ranged from detailed discussions about the beauty of women's roles in Islam to more matter-of-fact opinions and to more hesitant comments – “I have heard and intend/need to find out more”. A convert felt that Islam brought “direction, purpose and meaning” to her life (Liliana, London, January 2009), as did others who were Muslims by birth:

*It is Islam that has given women importance from childhood to old age. Till she dies she has been given a marktaba [position / station in society] and also a maqsad [greater aim / vision] for life. She has a role to play and duties to fulfil as a daughter, as a sister, as a wife and as a mother, and then as a mother-in-law and as a grandmother too. Her life goes on with a different maqsad and she will never feel that she is fariq [idle / free from work/useless].*

Samreen, Loughborough, July 2008

I asked participants about their understanding of the role of women and equality between the sexes. They were unanimous in their understanding that men and women were different but equal, something that feminists such as Irigaray (1993) and Waddy (1980) agree with and



others criticise (Daly 1986). They sometimes quoted verses of the Quran or in other cases cited a scholar or their own interpretations of what they had read to justify their answers:

*The role – I am probably going to give you the same answer that people gave you. Women have a certain role, men have a certain role. Its not that one is superior to another but it is more to do with what they are more suitable for.*

Shaila,<sup>7</sup> London, January 2009

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that Islam was emancipatory towards women and gave them rights. They also mentioned patriarchal cultural influences that in some social contexts denied Muslim women divinely ordained rights. Some participants had experienced these patriarchal influences that were often perpetuated by both men and women within Muslim communities. Participants saw a need for educational and other interventions to encourage the community to move away from these cultural atavisms.

*According to me Islam has given a lot of rights to women. Our society does not accept this [these rights]. It is not ready to give these rights to women, but Islam has given a lot of rights and a lot of freedom in its own way to women.*

Farhana, Coventry, November 2008

Marriage and motherhood were seen as a route to greater power in the domestic sphere (Philips 2009). Motherhood was often described as being an important aspect of a woman's life. Unmarried participants saw themselves as the 'mothers of tomorrow' (Joly 1987) who had roles and responsibilities in their families and in their communities. For some women motherhood was the epitome of women's success and satisfaction. For others it was a matter-of-fact aspect of their lives that they sought to balance with their educational and career aspirations. This could sometimes lead to opposition in those communities that insisted on patriarchal differentiations of gender roles. But nevertheless women seemed to get the family support and to fulfil their aspirations, as has also been reported by Ahmad (2001) and Bullock (2005).

*Sometimes when my Mum goes to a function or something, I know the other women will ask her. "How is your daughter doing?" And my Mum will always tell them that she is at university and she is doing her masters. And they [these women] are like – what's the point, she is going to get married, have children and stay at home, so what's the point of giving her all this education. My Mum will always say that she will study until she decides she doesn't want to study any more. Being a Muslim woman doesn't mean that you get married, have babies and stay in the kitchen all day. Religion doesn't tell you that. We also know that some of the greatest scholars were women. I think it's sad that people think that being a Muslim women means you sit in*

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<sup>7</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



*the kitchen and that's your life. You grow up, you hit puberty, you get married, and that's your life. I think that is so sad.*

Nazeera,<sup>8</sup> Markfield, June 2008

### 5.3 The 'Woman-ness' of being a Muslim – 'Ain't I a Woman?'

In 1851, Sojourner Truth challenged monolithic constructs of 'woman' and dramatically asked, 'Ain't I a woman?'. In her speech, Brah and Phoenix feel she 'deconstructs every single major truth-claim about gender in a patriarchal slave social formation' (Brah and Phoenix 2004: 77). Feminist thinking has since recognised the 'intersectionality' of the category 'woman' across socio-economic, religious, class and historical contexts – the different ways of 'being' a woman (Brah and Phoenix 2004; Danowitz Sagaria 2000; hooks 1989; Morgan 1970). I asked Muslim women what they felt about *being* women. Their responses were diverse. Many women acquiesced that they were women and resented the compartmentalisation of 'Muslim women' into what they felt was a separate category.

*I just think singling us out also makes us feel very different from women as a category. Like when you say Muslim women it's like we're not women but a different species – we don't feel, we don't cry, we don't laugh, we don't moan, we don't feel unhappy. You know when somebody says you're a Muslim woman, I feel like I have to take a step back and say "I am a Muslim woman I must behave like this. I must behave like that." [...] Why do I have to do that, just because somebody expects me to do that? Why do I have to be completely alien from womankind altogether? I am a woman. I feel everything another woman would feel. The only thing that makes me different from them [other women] is that I chose Islam [...]. And this doesn't change me being a woman [...]. I was born a woman. I feel like a woman. I talk like a woman. Everything else about me is woman-like. I don't think it should make such a drastic difference that I am Muslim woman. And sometimes I struggle with that because people don't want to see you as a human being or as a woman. They just want to see you as, "who are you?"; "where are you from?"; "do you come in peace?"- that kind of thing.*

Khalilah,<sup>9</sup> Birmingham, February 2008

Participants agreed that there were common aspects to all women's struggles. These included routine struggles managing careers and family duties to wider feminist struggles and activism for equality in public spheres. However participants felt that Muslim women

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<sup>8</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>9</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



were not always acknowledged as part of the sisterhood. Even within feminist discourse, often they were the different other as portrayed in academic literature and media rhetoric.

*I think in day-to-day life we are no different. I think there are certain challenges in terms of equal pay and equality in the home which I think are across the board. But because of our appearance and the hijab, we are seen as the 'other'. I acknowledge that the differences between a non-Muslim woman and Muslim woman are not much and the day-to-day challenges are the same. But I don't think that a non-Muslim woman believes that.*

Samina, Markfield, June 2008

This disunity / disjunction within the sisterhood is something that feminists have grappled with for a long time. Some of these differences are due to class or power relations that deem some women to be more authoritative than other women (hooks 1989). This may be because class privileges have given one set of women better education and more authority (Morgan 1970), or this could be because of politically infused indigenous-migrant relationships. This may also be caused by stereotypical understandings of Muslim women that deem her to be inferior in many ways and hence incapable of being able to participate in the sisterhood, making her different from 'other' women.

A few other participants were at the other end of this dichotomy – for them Islam was sufficient to differentiate them from other women. Their 'Muslim-ness' gave women rules and regulations that they chose to follow, they wore *hijabs*, did not drink alcohol and some of them limited their interactions with unrelated men.

*Yes definitely because I follow Islam and we do have restrictions like we can't drink, we can't mix freely with men. I am 100% different from non-Muslim women. I am a Muslim and I know the rules of being a Muslim.*

Norazian, Cheltenham, January 2009

I contrast this view of 'difference' with the pragmatism inspired view to initiate dialogue about the experiences of individuals that does not remove difference, but which makes difference easier to understand and part of the shared reality of individuals. For many women this was an ongoing debate that required self-reflection and discussion. Samreen was a volunteer teacher assistant when I first spoke to her in August 2008, now (March 2010) she is a full-time mother after giving birth to a baby girl, who needs her full attention. When I interviewed Samreen, she initially felt that as a Muslim she was different and distinct from other women. As a result of her interview and the ideas we shared, she thought about her own categorisation of women and Muslim women as different from each other. She later asked to



Speak about this matter again, this time she seemed to have changed her mind about the similarities and differences among women:

Sariya: *But aren't we biologically similar?*

Samreen: *Of course we are. When women have babies, many want to leave their jobs and careers because they want to spend time with their children. When I walk through town in the afternoon, I see more women than men and all with their babies. But I think you must take cognizance of the fact that Muslim women are different on one-point.*

Sariya: *But aren't we similar on another point?*

Samreen: *That's because we are all women. I feel that 50% we are the same and 50% we are different. And out of this second 50%, 25% is legitimate difference but the other 25% is been made to **seem different** [Samreen's emphasis]. You cannot base opinions of Muslim women on the actions of a few, just as we Muslim women cannot judge all non-Muslim women by the actions of a few women. I cannot judge all western women because some drink excessively. I have seen many who are highly educated, well-dressed and who have strong values by which they live their life. (my translation)<sup>10</sup>*

Samreen, Loughborough, July 2008

This raising of consciousness was something many feminist researchers including myself have aspired to achieve in our work. I believe that as a result of the research process many participants, including myself chose to rethink our existences in the pluralist world we inhabit. This sense of ambiguity and need for discussion about the category 'woman' is one that has always permeated feminist thinking in one way or the other. Robin Morgan writes about how she nurtured a 'secret contempt for other women who weren't as strong, free, and respected [by men]' as she thought she was (Morgan 1970: xv) till she realised that women were actually in it all together (she too mentions having a baby as partly causing this change of mind). hooks inspiringly writes:

While the struggle to eradicate sexism and sexist oppression is and should be the primary thrust of feminist movement, to prepare ourselves politically for this effort we must first learn how to be in solidarity, how to struggle with one another.

bell hooks (1989: 25)

I believe that through the process of thinking about themselves, and by talking about the shared aspects of their lives many participants in this research began to think as a collective of Muslim women and as a *collective of women*. This is an ongoing process of self-reflection and consciousness-raising that this research has initiated among the women who participated. This may only be a beginning but I believe this in one of this research's successes.

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<sup>10</sup> Samreen spoke in Urdu. She had the opportunity to verify and edit the interview transcript.



## 5.4 Layered Identities and Negotiating Britishness

Fixed, centred national or cultural identities are merely imagined communities (Anderson 2006; Hall 1992) within which individuals are in a state of constant negotiation with cultures, nationalities, religions and races different from their own. The myriad value-systems and opinions that communities today encompass, lead to an amplification of the significance of identity positions (Tomlinson 2003) that may at times be divergent or in conflict with each other. The British Muslim population is more diverse than other minority communities in Britain (Jawad 2003; Beckford *et al* 2006) and 'is better understood in terms of its individual ethnic components' (Beckford *et al* 2006: 38).

While there have been Muslim communities in Britain since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the large and diverse British Muslim communities are a fairly recent phenomenon with the first large groups of Muslims coming to Britain as migrants from the Indian sub-continent in the 1950s (which lasted till the mid 1970s) and then again as Ugandan Asian migrants in the 1970s (Cross & Waldinger 1992). For migrant populations, identity positions must straddle new diasporas – 'they must learn to inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them (Hall 1992: 310). The identity positions of young British Muslim women are characterised and complicated by cultural cross-overs and mixes between the culture their parents or they themselves migrated from, their British culture and other cultural affiliations that they may have (Dwyer 2002). Malika's comment's highlight this complicated dilemma that many Muslim women in Britain face:

*When I go to Morocco, they say you are a stranger. When I go to France they say you are a stranger. When I go to Morocco, I say, "I am Moroccan" and they say "No you are not Moroccan you are French". When I go to France they say, "you are not French you are Arab", because they don't make out the difference (between Moroccan and Arab). And when I come to Britain I am confused sometimes when people ask me, "Oh, so where are you from?". If I say I am French, they look at my face and say, "you are not French". And if I say I am Moroccan that doesn't work either..... What are my children going to say – they are Moroccan, French, British, Pakistani. It's going to be confusing.*

Malika, London, January 2009

In her doctoral research, Dwyer explored the 'complex, contextual, relational and provisional ways in which young Muslim women articulate their identity (Dwyer 1997:216). Young Muslim women's identity positions are not just complex, they are also fractured as they contest and construct different meanings of Muslimness in their varied contexts and social situations (Dwyer 1997). Dwyer describes syncretic identities through which her participants describe themselves as British and or Pakistani and or Asian both as an opposition to their



parent's fixed cultural identities and also against racialised constructs of Britishness (1997). This was similar to participants' constructs of identity in my research:

*First and foremost I would call myself a Muslim. Then I would call myself a British citizen. And then I would say I am Bengali, but I just oppose so many things that my [Bengali] culture includes.*

Shahida,<sup>11</sup> Coventry November 2008

*I am classified as mixed race. I am British. I do think I am Muslim as well. It is got to be a mixture and it has got to be a balance. I am not too sure. It is something to think about.*

Safiya J,<sup>12</sup> Cheltenham, January 2009

I developed this discourse about identity of young British Muslims further. Participants often mentioned identities which retain certain cultural values and traditions from their parent's countries of origin, while they also adapted to 'fit' into British society. Based on my analysis of interview transcripts I agree with Hussain (2004) that for young British Muslims, who are second and even third generation migrants, there is no contradiction between being British and Muslim (Anwar 1994). These young people are negotiating an evolving British Muslim culture that is informed by their parents' cultural roots but which is also different from the cultural backgrounds of their parents and which reflects their Britishness:

*I am a Muslimah and Islam is my religion, just as a Christian woman would practice her religion and she lives in a multicultural society. I see no contradiction whatsoever. I call myself a British Muslimah. I don't see a clash between the two and I don't see why I should choose between the two. These are who I am. They make me who I am. I am British as well as a Muslim.*

Khadija,<sup>13</sup> Coventry, November 2008

This British Islam places lesser focus on denominational and cultural differences within the Muslim community. Participants did not always identify with the traditions that their parents had 'imported' from their countries of origin. Sometimes out of respect for their parents they may choose to conform to a tradition – for example a young woman mentioned wearing *salwar kameez*,<sup>14</sup> rather than her usual jeans or trousers, when she accompanied her mother to social gatherings because her mother felt this was more appropriate. On other matters women were less willing to compromise, so for example in choosing a marriage partner,

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<sup>11</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>12</sup> Three participants are named Safia or Safiya, to differentiate between them I initial the first letter of their surnames.

<sup>13</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>14</sup> Traditional garment worn by Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women which consists of a pair of light loose trousers (*salwar*) worn with a long tunic (*kameez*) and a *dupatta* – a length of material that can be draped across the shoulders or over the head.



women were more concerned about a prospective groom's Islamic practice and personal compatibility rather than his cultural background – which for some parents was more important:

*If there is something that they tell me about behaving in a particular way and its cultural, I will tell them that it has nothing to do with Islam its just your culture.*

*Because I grew up in Europe I am obviously going to have some European culture in me.*

Shukri, Coventry, November 2008

Although participants have social links and may visit the countries that their parents or grandparents came from, these countries are not always 'back home' as it was for their parents. Britain *is* home. Contrary to certain opinions (BBC 2007b) about the loyalties of Asian communities, the predominantly Asian Muslim women I spoke to were content living in Britain. They were grateful for the opportunities that they received, including the freedom to study and practise Islam, which they had here. They contrasted this with other so called 'Muslim countries' where women may be denied basic freedoms. They were 'happy' here:

*I would just identify myself as a happy Muslim woman living in a western society with all religious principles and morals preserved.*

Somayah, Coventry, November 2008

During group discussions with participants, I asked them about this 'British Muslim culture'. They agreed with this hypothesis stating that this concept helped them alleviate confusions they had about *their* identity position. They felt closer to their British upbringing and education than to the cultural practices of older generations which they sometimes saw as contradicting Islamic beliefs as they (participants) understood them. In this dialogue about British Muslims the *hijab* took on new significance which I will discuss in the following chapter. While further research is required on this subject, my initial analysis of participants 'British Muslim identity' indicates that as with any identity position it is always constantly negotiated (Hall, 1992) in the changing contexts of those whom it identifies. But it is noteworthy that these young people do not to the same extent experience the disjunctions and tensions that their elders felt in straddling two or more cultures, for these young people being British Muslims is a natural juxtaposition of their pluralist realities.

## **5.5 Conclusion - Being a Muslim Woman - the Irony of Categories**

In this chapter I have explored the multiplicity in the category 'Muslim Woman'. Muslim women's faith influences and directs their lives in many ways as does their innate woman-ness that they share with women of all social *and* cultural backgrounds. The struggles of



women are therefore simultaneously diverse and universal. I also explored how young British Muslim women negotiate their Britishness and their Muslimness in contexts that are different from those their parents experienced. This chapter is about the categories Muslim women in Britain have to endure, which may or may not have their acquiescence. A category distinguishes a thing as different from some thing else and may differentiate even where differentiations do not exist. A participant who is an academic researcher involved in a media-related research project recalled a story, about what she felt was a silly but poignant conversation about Muslim women, which was described to her:

*I was talking to a BBC broadcaster in London and he is looking to do a documentary on cancer and he is representing all different women and he was looking for a Muslim woman as well. His challenge was to get a Muslim woman who would come forward to talk [about her experiences with cancer in a public forum]. He was talking to a colleague about this and the colleague asked, "Do Muslim women get cancer as well?". What are we not human!?!<sup>15</sup>*

Samina, Markfield, June 2008

There is 'much common ground between the experiences of women, regardless of faith or other attempts to categorise difference' (Benn and Jawaad 2003: 172). But nevertheless categories persist and I hope through this chapter to have clarified some of the complexities, nuances and ironies that are possible within the category 'Muslim women'. These diversities among Muslim women are exemplified in their varied understandings and practices of the *hijab* – which has become a signifier of their visibility (Tarlo 2010). In the next chapter, an exploration of Muslim women's narratives and experiences of the *hijab*, challenges stereotypical notions of the women who wear it.

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<sup>15</sup> I wrote this chapter before Ayesha (name changed to protect participant's anonymity) a research participant died of cancer. I was unsure whether to delete this quote or retain it. Finally I have decided to let it be, because my memory of Ayesha is that she wanted her voice and the voice of all Muslim women to be heard.



## CHAPTER 6

**Women's Narratives of the *Hijab***

*"It's a part of what makes me, me."<sup>1</sup>*

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**6.1 Introduction: Why a New Discourse on the *Hijab***

The concept of *hijab*, often alluding to the head scarf worn by Muslim women, is much debated in secular scholarship, feminist literature, Islamic theology, in Muslim communities and within popular media. The nature of the debates vary from feminist arguments about the *hijab*'s perceived 'oppression' of women to the Muslim apologist's version which portrays the *hijab* as an emancipator of the women who wear it and as a hallmark of piety. As a researcher who 'wears' the *hijab*, I believe these representations over-simplify the *hijab* as a garment worn by Muslim women to cover their hair and possibly other parts of the body. By focussing on '*hijab* - the garment' these texts fail to convey to readers the more nuanced meanings that '*hijab* - the concept' holds for the women who wear it, and who consider it to be a divinely ordained framework which defines guidelines for both male and female modesty. Also existing literature surrounding the *hijab* often treat it as a homogeneous practise, failing to contextualise the multifarious cultural, regional, theological and linguistic understandings that influence the way it is practised and worn.

Few texts consult with, or voice the opinions, interpretations and narrations of the women who wear it. This chapter of my work concentrates on filling this gap and will present the voices of '*hijabis*' or '*muhajabahs*'<sup>2</sup> on why they wear the *hijab*, the challenges caused by wearing the *hijab* in multicultural, secular society and the balancing acts that are often required. I hope to demystify the *hijab* through the voices and opinions of the research participants. Out of the 45 young Muslim women I spoke to during the initial research process, 42 wore the *hijab*. The three women who did not wear it for various reasons had their own interpretations of modesty that they followed. They also insisted that they may consider wearing the *hijab* in the future. Fauzia,<sup>3</sup> for example, does not wear the *hijab* but

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<sup>1</sup> The comment was made by a young woman who recently got married. She has chosen to remain anonymous. Throughout the research I refer to her as Huda.

<sup>2</sup> Both words *Hijabi* and *Muhajabah* are used to refer to a woman who dresses as per Islamic modesty frameworks including wearing a form of *hijab* which could be just the headscarf or headscarf and a long overcoat / outer-gown-like garment called the *jilbab*. *Muhajabah* is Arabic word. The word *hijab* however is more commonly used in social contexts.

<sup>3</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



always uses a *dupatta*<sup>4</sup> which she drapes across her shoulders, for her this is an indispensable aspect of her modesty:

*I do not cover my head, but am very particular about covering up according to my own criteria to the extent that I do not like anything showing from above my dupatta [she indicated her neck]. I agree that you have to cover your head.*

Fauzia, Loughborough, July 2008

My research sample consists of a higher proportion of *hijabi*'s because participants were recruited from institutions specialising in Islamic studies and through student Islamic societies at universities. These participants were available at the institutions or in university Islamic prayer rooms because they were more inclined to be 'practising' - *pratiquants* who were dedicated towards their Islamic practices including praying, fasting and *hijab* (Bowen, 2007). Although my sample is not representative of the *hijab* practices of the entire British Muslim population it is indicative of a resurgence of the *hijab* that is being described in literature about young Muslim women living in the west (Vyas 2008; Haddad *et al* 2006; Syed 2005; Alvi *et al* 2003; Afshar 1994).

This resurgence seems to challenge views expressed in some literature that describes the *hijab* as a symbol of oppression and the backwardness of women, which would gradually become less prevalent as education levels and development increased in Muslim societies (Azim 1997). Often this resurgence of the veil or the *hijab* is associated with 'Political Islam', which it is claimed, is ultimately responsible for extremism and fundamentalism especially among Muslim youth. In my research this resurgence of the veil seems to indicate a very different phenomenon – it seems indicative of a new generation of Muslim women in Britain who have higher levels of education, who are more secure living in multicultural society, who are confident about the social roles, and who use their *hijabs* to articulate and clarify their faith to the communities they live in.

## 6.2 Informing a New Discourse

### 6.2.1 Over-signification of the *Hijab*

When I initially began this research, I did not want to discuss the *hijab* at all. The excessive focus on the *hijab*, both within the Muslim community and in multicultural society, distracts from other more important discussions that society needs to have about Muslim women (Bewley 1999; Shabanova 1920). Some Muslim communities expect Muslim women to dress

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<sup>4</sup> a length of cloth / scarf used by South Asian women either draped across shoulders or over the head.



in a particular way, which is then stereotyped by pluralist secular society as backward. In this debate more urgent issues like education and healthcare are sidelined:

*So if you are a Muslim and want to wear the hijab that's fine, you don't have to wear the scarf just because you are Muslim or to show that you are Muslim. Being a Muslim must come from the heart. [...] It feels like hijab makes you Muslim which is not true. Hijab does not make you Muslim. Being a Muslim is more than hijab, its character, personality, attitude towards others.*

Ghazala, Markfield, June 2008

However for this research I also set out to give voice to the 'practising Muslim woman' and I structured my research with this as a core underpinning principle. Feminist epistemology insisted I give voice to the marginalised – in this case Muslim women empowering them as collaborators in the creation of new knowledge. My pragmatist stand-point ensured I speak about and try to resolve issues of contemporary significance. During the initial semi-structured interviews when participants *chose* to speak about the *hijab*, I had to reformulate my (then) proposed thesis structure to include a chapter on their understandings of the *hijab*. Their enthusiasm to talk about the *hijab* required me to include it as one of the discussion-points for the second, group discussion stage of field-work.<sup>5</sup> Finally in the digital storytelling (DST) phase where the women created self-representational narrative presentations for audiences from other / no faith backgrounds, again the *hijab* by its visibility in women's photographs was an implicit aspect of their autobiographical stories.

The decision to include *hijab* discourses was not just made because I was being methodologically conscientious. As a *hijabi* myself, I am intrigued by this passion that young women have for what can alternatively be described as a mere piece of cloth, a political statement or religious conviction. My participants' standpoint about the *hijab* and why they wore it, presented an opportunity to fill a gap in existing literature about the *hijab* which rarely contextualises the wearer's opinion. As a *hijabi* myself, *my* lens empathised with what participants said.

It was never my intention for this research to be another objective, unemotional and unfeeling exploration of Muslim women. There is enough research that explores, interrogates and critiques Muslim women's issues from the outside. Many of these offer excellent opportunities for reader to develop initial understanding of the issues at hand, others not so excellent, nevertheless they all remain incomplete if they do not include experiential knowledge of *being* a Muslim woman. There is some debate, which I have already introduced and discussed, that contests the pros and cons of insider or outsider research and which position offers a better 'vantage' point (Altorki & Fawzi El-Solh 1988; Whyte

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<sup>5</sup> Appendix H contains the Powerpoint slides that were used for the Group Discussion



1981). My position as a feminist researcher is that, for research to contest the marginality inscribed on the 'different other', it must be experienced from the inside as well as observed at least partially from the outside. As an insider – a Muslim woman doing research *with* Muslim women or as a *hijabi* doing research with other *hijabis* – I can translate for the reader at least partially, the religiosity, the 'Islamic-ness', the femininity and indeed the 'normalness' of someone who is perceived as 'different' simply because she dresses differently. In increasingly secularised society, the *hijab* also makes a Muslim woman visible as religious and not conforming to dominant secular 'rational' values.

Finally as I transcribed and then analysed participants' narratives, I unearthed an underpinning desire to converse about, to clarify and to demystify the *hijab* within their diverse pluralistic communities. Perhaps this was inter-community dialogue at a very micro level. Identity and identification was another recurring theme within what the women were saying. This new generation of young *hijabis* seemed to have transformed a passive garment into an interactive tool that they use, often proactively, to create more understanding about their faith and to hence create semblances of cohesion in what some commentators describe as increasingly 'more polarised and segmented' societies (Carey 2008).

### 6.2.2 Contextualisation - What is the *Hijab*?

The heterogeneity among Muslim women is apparent in the way that the *hijab* is understood and worn. Participants use different terms which will need to be clarified as part of this chapter. I will also discuss the relevant theological justifications about the *hijab*. I am not an expert in Quranic exegesis; however I am a believer and will present a description of the religious basis of the *hijab* which is sufficient to convince many Muslim women to wear the *hijab*.<sup>6</sup> In the Quran the word '*hijab*' appears only in one place and refers to a 'curtain' that protects modesty.<sup>7</sup> The *hijab* guidelines for men and women include lowering the gaze, limiting unnecessary interaction with the opposite gender, modesty and subscribing to gender-specific dress codes. These guidelines are derived from the Quran, the *Sunnah* and the *Ijma*<sup>8</sup> of Muslim scholars. The Quranic basis for the *hijab* can be traced to the following verses of the Quran:

*30. Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: And Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. 31. And say to the believing women that they should lower their*

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the theological basis of the *hijab* please see Roald, Anne Sofie (2001) *Islamic Female Dress in Women in Islam: the Western experience* London; New York: Routledge, 2001, p.254 - 294

<sup>7</sup> Holy Quran 33:53

<sup>8</sup> Consensus or agreement



*gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain Bliss.*

Holy Quran, Chapter 24, Verses 30-31

*33. O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, so that they may be recognised and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful.*

Holy Quran, Chapter 33, Verse 59

When used in conversations, the word *hijab* can alternatively refer to the headscarf worn by a Muslim woman; it can also refer to the headscarf worn along with a long loose outer-garment also called the *jilbab* or the *khimar* a piece of cloth used to cover the head; another oft-repeated term is the *niqab* which refers to a piece of cloth used to cover the face; and finally *pardah* which normally refers to system that includes strict segregation for women. Most of these terms are used interchangeably or synonymously depending on cultural contexts. Terms such as *abaya*, *burka* and *chador* refer to various styles of the *jilbab* or outer-garment. For practicality and also because this is the most commonly-used term (Esposito 2003) – in conversations and in the media – this research will use '*hijab*' to refer to the various garments described above.

Cultural backgrounds tend to influence *how* women wear the *hijab*, for e.g. while South Asian women prefer wearing the *salwar kameez* and *dupatta* which they may or may not use to cover their head; Arab women tend to wear a loose outer garment over their clothes; and Malaysian women have their own brightly coloured version of *hijab* which they call the *jubah*.<sup>9</sup> Most participants in this research chose to wear the *hijab* as a headscarf over normal clothes that conform to Islamic requirements – loose, not transparent and covering the body, while a few wore a *jilbab* over their clothes along with a headscarf. Two participants covered their faces with a *niqab* – a practice for which the consensus opinion is that although it may be commendable; it is optional for the woman to choose if she wants to wear it – a decision which she has the choice to make while taking into consideration her social and personal situation (Khan, 2008). For many scholars the following *hadith* is clear evidence of the *niqab* or face covering, not being a necessary aspect of the female dress code:

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<sup>9</sup> *Jubah* means a long loose garment.



Narrated Aisha, Ummul Mu'minin:<sup>10</sup>

*Asma, daughter of AbuBakr, entered upon the Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) wearing thin clothes. The Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) turned his attention from her. He said: O Asma', when a woman reaches the age of menstruation, it does not suit her that she displays her parts of body except this and this, and he pointed to her face and hands.*

Sunan Abu Dawud Book 32, Number 4092

### 6.2.3 Two Discourses

Clarke (2003) finds it interesting that in the majority of cases when a *hadith* mentions *hijab* it normally refers to modesty or dress code guidelines for men whereas only a few discuss or present evidence of *hijab* guidelines for women. For her this is indicative of an attitude of flexibility towards women's *hijab* in foundational Islamic texts. However this egalitarianism seems to have dissipated especially in recent texts that are considered to be sources of religious guidance for Muslim women. Such literature present an understanding of the *hijab* which uses modesty as a pretext to limit a woman's role to her home as 'her natural sphere' and endorse an understanding of the *hijab* that includes covering of the face (Khan 1995; Maududi 1972; Thanvi 1905). I disagree with these limiting understandings of the *hijab* because they enforce an extreme interpretation of Islamic values that in reality are nuanced and flexible towards the needs of all believers including women. The woman's voice is not heard nor is she asked for her opinion. Finally in pluralist contexts such rhetoric depicts and strengthens an image of a misogynist faith.

At the other end of the *hijab* discourse there are academic scholars mostly women who use what they perceive as ambiguity in the Quran to justify an opinion that the *hijab* or head scarf is not a necessary aspect of the dress code of a woman (Ahmed, 1992). Clarke (2003) for example argues that women's covering for the sake of modesty including the covering the hair, does not have a basis in the *hadiths*. Asma Barlas in her discussion about the *hijab* concludes that while the Quran does mandate 'that both men and women comport themselves modestly [...] there is absolutely nothing in these values that supports the conservative Muslim position on [...] the practice of veiling' (2002:160). Nawal El Saadawi (1980) is also assertive in her opposition of the *hijab* associating it with suppressed Muslim women, while Fatima Mernissi (1985) argues that it is an unjust symbol of male oppression of women and must be discouraged.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Mother of the believers

<sup>11</sup> Prof Shaheen Sardar Ali also took this stance in a discussion we had on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010. According to Prof. Shaheen the verse 24:31 of the Quran refers to drawing a veil across the bosom only which is how she understood and practised *hijab*. She also feels that the *hijab* in secular Western contents by drawing attention to *hijabis* may defeat the scriptural purpose of covering / hiding / protecting women.



#### 6.2.4 Deconstructing Stereotypes

The hijab is a signifier for most stereotypes that are ascribed to Muslim women. In order to move beyond historical rivalries and politics, towards a society that is willing to understand and respect the 'difference' of the 'different other' (Jenkins 2004) it is necessary to critique these stereotypes. In chapter four, I used collective memory work (Halbwachs 1941) as a framework to discuss how stereotypes are used to set up barriers between 'us' and 'them' (Hinton 2000; Hussain 2004; Pickering 2001). An academic critique of dominant negative stereotypes creates an opportunity to clarify difference. If as individuals and communities we recognise a stereotype for what it is, then perhaps it ceases to be one.

The earliest negative stereotyping of the *hijab* can be seen in Orientalist explorations of Islam as the exotic *other* and the *hijab* as a symbol of Islamic degradation of women (Lewis 1996; Said 1978). It was this practice according to the imperialist ideology that stood in the way of the 'progress' and 'civilisation' of Muslim societies (Ahmed 1992), which had to be removed. This stereotype of the *hijab* as backward was furthered in feminist literature (Mernissi 1985, 1991; El Saadawi 1980), its removal was demanded and there was a wave of public unveilings.<sup>12</sup> These historical stereotypes continue to influence how Muslim women are represented in the media and influence their interactions within society. Participants described they are often perceived as under-educated or uneducated women who cannot speak English. Occasionally participants describe more serious ramifications of the *othering* that is a result of this stereotyping – they themselves or other *hijabi* acquaintances being the victims of hate crimes provoked by their *hijabs*.

There is another stereotype of the *hijab*, one that I have not found reference to in academic texts. Many research participants mention a stereotypical opinion in many Muslim communities of how a woman who wears a *hijab* must behave in society. Nazeera is a young woman who wears a *niqab*. As a *niqabi*,<sup>13</sup> her experiences of people's expectations of how she must behave are perhaps more profound, but other participants who do not wear the *niqab* also described similar experiences:

*There is this whole concept of being a niqabi. You have to act in a certain way; you have to be in a certain way and I don't think that should apply [...] It's such a heavy burden to wear, when you put the Niqab on. It's more about what people expect of you than what you are doing for yourself. I've had people tell me all year "You're not a typical Niqabi". What is a typical Niqabi? Why because I am loud, because I am intelligent, Alhamdulillah.<sup>14</sup> It's like what do you expect a Niqabi to be – are you*

<sup>12</sup> Huda Shaarawi publicly removed her scarf (Sunshine 2001); Bullock records a young Egyptian feminist throwing her grandmother's veils into the Nile (Bullock 2003).

<sup>13</sup> A woman who wears the Niqab

<sup>14</sup> Praise be to God



*expecting a mousy little person to be walking 10 feet behind the man. What's a typical Niqabi?*

Nazeera,<sup>15</sup> Markfield, June 2008

She must be of a certain demeanour; she must be quiet, not laugh, stay at home and perhaps not even have fun. Participants assert that this has no basis whatsoever in foundational religious texts, in the *hadith* for example there are clear references to the *Sahabiya*<sup>16</sup> 'having fun' – horse races, entertainment and singing. It is similar stereotypes that Aisha Bewley (1999: 6) alludes to when she says:

it is time to re-examine the sources and re-assess how Muslim women in the past acted so that we can escape the limiting perspectives which have come to be the norm.

### 6.3 Initiating a New Discourse:

#### What are Muslim Women saying about *Hijab*?

The young Muslim women I spoke to for this research feel that the *hijab* is an important and integral aspect of their lives. Most participants were aware of the different meanings that the *hijab* can hold for the cultures they live in. The multiplicity of cultural affiliations within the British Muslim diaspora when confronted by the young people's 'British Muslim' identity can create tensions in many aspects of their Islamic practice, more so for young women. The religious 'differences of opinion' which can permeate the same family unit is exemplified in the experiences of, *Maryam*<sup>17</sup>, a young woman who converted to Islam. When Maryam converted, she realised that her faith and a desire to be "*recognised as a Muslim*" made her want to wear the *hijab*. But she had to be careful how she introduced the practice to her family, especially her mother, because the *hijab* did not fit into the secular culture of the family who considered praying and religiosity to be "*meaningless*":

*I started off wearing it, because firstly people were telling me that as a Muslim you have to wear it. But I wasn't ready because I was struggling to learn the prayer and stuff. But then I felt when I was in the street I wanted to be recognised as a Muslim, I wanted to say "Assalam alaikum",<sup>18</sup> and I tried to say "Assalam alaikum" to people, but because I looked like a normal British young woman they would just pass by. They would just look at me and walk off because they always thought that I am not*

<sup>15</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>16</sup> The *Sahabah* are the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and are considered to be role models for Muslims.

<sup>17</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>18</sup> "Assalam Alaikum" is an Islamic greeting that is commonly used in Islamic contexts. It translates to "May peace be with you"



*Muslim. So I wanted people to see that I am Muslim. So that's when I started to wear the scarf. I did it gradually – [wear it] when I got far away from my house and then walk around and then I took it off near my home so that my mother didn't see because she didn't like me wearing it in the beginning.*

Maryam,<sup>19</sup> London, January 2009

Some would argue that a convert's experiences are not representative of the experiences of an individual born and brought-up in a Muslim family. I agree that in some cases this may be true. Participants tell me how they were initiated into wearing the *hijab* at the age of nine or when they first "grew up" and how they felt "it was the right thing to do". Others speak about wearing the *hijab* because everybody in the family, including highly-admired aunties and older cousins wore the *hijab*. A few even mentioned being "cool" among their peers because they were the first in their Muslim-dominated schools to wear the *hijab*. Their *hijabs* enabled them to fit in and set a trend.

For other participants, the choice to wear the *hijab* or to continue to wear the *hijab* was a decision they took independently and occasionally without the support of their parents who subscribed to cultural understandings of the *hijab*. Some elders felt that the *hijab* was something to wear only within the (Muslim) community and not in pluralist contexts; other more 'modern' parents felt that it was not required at all – their western educated daughters did not need to wear the *hijab*; while more 'culturally traditional' parents did not appreciate the fact that the *hijab* gave strength and emancipation to the young women who wore it. It is in this context that Maryam's tensions with her mother regarding the *hijab* become relevant to many other young women. When Samina, a Muslim by birth, decided to wear the *hijab*, she had the support of her immediate family but not of her extended community:

*But at the same time within the social community of people whom we used to meet as a family, I didn't get such positive support. They were like "Why are you wearing it?" and "Do you need to wear it?" And that was the challenging part. At weddings people would be like "Oh! just take it off".<sup>20</sup>*

Samina, Markfield, June 2008

Young women use the *hijab* to assert their religiosity to their families and also as a tool to demand Islamic rights that may be denied to them for cultural reasons. When families from the Indian sub-continent first moved to the UK, external symbols of religion were sometimes

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<sup>19</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>20</sup> At many Muslim weddings separate seating and other facilities are organised for men and women. Men and women have their own spaces to party in and in the female-only environments women remove their Hijabs to reveal the latest fashions they are wearing. Samina probably attended a wedding where men and women were not segregated, hence her insistence not to remove her *hijab*.



cast-off in an effort to assimilate into their new western settings. This waning of external symbols was often inversely proportional to the strength that private / personal practices

gained and occasionally these were not always Islamic practices. For example, while *hijabs* were occasionally abandoned, girls and women needed to be protected from the 'corrupting' influences of western education. In some Muslim families this led to the curbing of women's access to education which I believe was unislamic. It is practices such as these that young women can challenge when empowered by the *hijab*. Although not all Muslim communities practise wearing the *hijab*, it remains a symbol of piety and religious authority. Many young women realise this strength invested in them by the *hijab* and use it, along with their knowledge of the Quran and the *Sunnah* to articulate and demand their rights.

In the quest for rights, Islam seems to be their most effective tool. It is not an easy struggle, and involves challenging and sometimes rejecting aspects of their family's ethnic culture. Homa Hoodfar (2003) discusses a similar phenomenon where Canadian Muslim women use the veil as an 'adaptive strategy' to articulate their religious, social and cultural stand-points by choosing to practise or not practise the veil. For Algerian women the veil became a 'mechanism of resistance' – they did not remove it when the colonialist wanted to unveil Algeria. Later in the course of revolutionary action 'the veil helped Algerian women to meet the new problems created by the struggle' (Fanon 1989: 63; Bailey and Tawadros 2003).

For participants in this research the veil also signified choice. During interviews participants' reasons to wear the *hijab* were often discussed – faith, identity, modesty, spiritual strength, security, comfort, protection being some of the common themes.<sup>21</sup> However faith and identity stood-out as the two main reasons for almost all the young women I spoke to. This is validated by the Quranic injunction which includes the clause 'so that they may be recognised as believing women' (Holy Quran 33:59). To further examine these findings, during group discussions I asked women what was more important to them as a group – faith or identity.

During the first group discussion with participants at Loughborough, half the women decided faith was their priority in wearing the *hijab* while the other half decided it was identity, which resulted in an animated and extended discussion. However as I continued my discussions with other women a theme began to emerge that connected faith and identity as two overlapping and complementary reasons for why young women wore the *hijab* – "*we assert our identity through our hijabs, but our identity is our faith*" (Group Discussion, Loughborough, May 2009). These two concepts – faith and identity are developed in this chapter.

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<sup>21</sup> This is also multiplicity of meanings that women derive from their *hijab* is evident in the research by Tarleton, Kazi & Francis, 2008



### 6.3.1 Balanced Faith

Most literature around the veil is dominated by two mutually antagonistic understandings of the veil:

- a patriarchal portrayal of the *hijab* as the epitome of honour and chastity of a woman, and also the realm and limit of her social activity; and
- some feminist understandings which dismiss it as oppressive and unnecessary.

Both these discourses do not represent the voice of the *hijabi*. All 45 participants who collaborated in this research, including those who did not wear it agreed that modesty was part of a Muslim's life – male or female, and 44 out of the 45 agreed that covering all your hair was an integral part of the modesty guidelines for Muslim women. The participant, who disagreed with covering the hair, still felt that the *hijab* was a part of Islam and had a function to play in the life of a woman, however she also felt that in certain Muslim communities the "*hijab had become too prescriptive*" (Amra, Warwick, November 2008). The three women who did not wear a headscarf also agreed that it was an essential aspect of Islamic guidelines for Muslim women; wearing or not wearing it is a choice that they would consider making in the future based on personal and social circumstance – the *hijab* almost became an ideal that these young women *aspired* to achieve. Two participants – a French woman and a Turkish woman, had immigrated to Britain, simply so that they could escape the *hijab*-ban in the countries of their origin and practise their *hijab* freely in Britain.

During the group discussion stage of the research, I discussed with participants those standpoints about the *hijab*, which dismissed it as an unnecessary cultural innovation which did not have any basis in Islamic foundational texts. Participants unanimously disagreed with these opinions – they recognised the *hijab* as a requirement of their faith which they intended to conform to. At the same time they do not subscribe to conservative interpretations of the *hijab* which limit women's social roles. They articulated varied understandings of Islamic principles of modesty which required them 'to cover', but which do not impede educational or professional achievement. Participants often referred to the comfort, protection and confidence they derived from the *hijab*. If a reason is needed to justify the topicality and necessity of this 'new' *hijab* discourse, it would be to unravel these 'balanced' interpretations of the *hijab* that young Muslim women are initiating and perpetuating in their everyday lives:

*I started wearing hijab, previously it was faith. But when I came over here [Britain] I felt a dual responsibility – I must wear it myself and I must also wear it to present a correct understanding of Islam as well.*

Roohee, Loughborough, July 2008



### 6.3.2 Identity

After faith, identity was the second reason participants mentioned for wearing the *hijab*. Identity arises from the narrativisation of the self within external representations – the discursive construction of a ‘we’, of which the ‘I’ becomes a loyal and, perhaps, a contributing part irrespective of any differences or divisions (Hall 1996). This is the ‘we’ that Muslim women have been able to represent in their donning of the *hijab*. This appropriation of the Islamic garb as an expression of identity is apparent in the narrations of the Muslim women in Britain whom I spoke to as well as in research with American women (Williams & Vashi 2007; Haddad *et al* 2006; Badr 2004):

*It's a part of what make me, me*

Huda,<sup>22</sup> Birmingham, February 2008

Huda wears the *hijab* because she feels it epitomises who she is. Maryam, the convert to Islam, whom I earlier quoted, narrates how she wanted to be recognised as a Muslim woman. Young women derive this identity position from their Islamic faith and from their social situations, living and working in pluralist society. Identity implies a degree of ‘sameness’ yet it is constructed out of ‘difference’. It is relational with ‘another’ (Hussain 2004) which is ‘different’ – the personal and the external. In Islam the religious / personal life is not different from the social / public life. It is a smooth progression of one into the other. Identity is created at the intersection of the public and private lives, it is the reflection of the social on the individual, but for a practising Muslim this difference between the two realms is blurred to the extent that there is no difference. This is difficult to resolve in societies where religion is considered external to social spheres. The identity of a Muslim woman, as expressed in the *hijab* which she derives from her Islamic faith may seem to be in conflict with her secular environs. The *hijab* may be perceived by secular society as a threat to dominant secular values, leading to polemical discourses about the veil in many western societies (Bowen 2007; BBC 2010a).

### 6.4 Hijab, Objectification and “the Pressure to Look Good”!

The *hijab* is often portrayed as antagonistic to ‘modern’ values of emancipation and women’s liberation. Western feminists are suspicious of the *hijab*, which may be due to their original opposition to forms of veiling that were dominant in Judeo-Christian historical milieux. According to some feminists, most if not all formal religion consists of patriarchy-imposed religious symbolism which is invariably aimed at establishing and perpetuating male dominance (Christ 1997; Irigaray 1993; Daly 1970, 1985; Beauvoir 1949), and the

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<sup>22</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



requirement for women to veil is part of this system. Daly (1985) for example writes about the 'symbolism of the veil' being used in Christian religious discourses to impose women's submission and subordination to man's dominance (Daly 1970, 1985).

I asked participants about this. "Is the *hijab* oppressive towards women?"; "Does the donning of the *hijab* imply that you unknowingly subscribe to theories of male dominance?"

Participants asserted that the *hijab*, when worn by *choice* was not a symbol of woman's degradation. Their *hijab* worn by choice was different from the enforced *hijab* of women in Saudi Arabia or Afghanistan – a practice which they condemned. Participants' *hijab* was a symbol of her self-determination, independence and agency. They wore it for faith reasons and identification, and to ensure their modesty. They recognised modesty as relative to varied social, cultural and religious contexts but maintained that the Islamic frameworks of modesty that they had *chosen* to adhere to, gave them freedom and ownership of their beauty and their femininity. It takes away the "pressure to look good" which has become central to many young women's lives in societies that are becoming increasingly obsessed with perfect(ing) bodies and physical appearances.

*But one reason may be of course that it takes you away from a pressure to look good. [...] it's taking you away from the pressure of having to look good for somebody else.*

Shamsia,<sup>23</sup> Birmingham, February 2008

For these young Muslim women, wearing the *hijab* ensured that they were valued for their intellectual capabilities and skills as differentiated from valorisation by society and men for their body or for their beauty. By taking away the "pressure to look good" the *hijab* enables women to reject and overcome objectification by the male gaze. The *hijab* emancipates the wearer from being a sexual object so that she is recognised as a complete individual. Katherine Bullock recognises this in her work with Canadian *hijabis*, she says 'the *hijab* acts as an empowering tool of resistance to the consumer capitalist culture's beauty game' (2003: 219).

*I feel that wearing the hijab emancipates me as a person because you dress modestly as per the Islamic norms. People focus on who you are and what you are saying and not on your beauty or on your body.*

Leila,<sup>24</sup> London, January 2009

Aisha Bewley (1999) gives this emancipatory understanding of the *hijab* religious validity by quoting Ayesha – the wife of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), who said, "How splendid are the

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<sup>23</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>24</sup> Participant is a convert to Islam and requested that her Muslim name be used in this research.



women of the *Ansar*.<sup>25</sup> Modesty did not prevent them from becoming learned in the *din*<sup>26</sup> (Bewley 1999: 7). This is what the *hijab* means to practising Muslim women, it is an articulation of faith and an embodiment of divinely-prescribed frameworks for modesty. At the same time it creates opportunities for her to understand her faith and to go out into public life as a contributing member without the risk of objectification. I interrogated participants on this – “Wasn’t the *hijab* something that was enforced upon women by religion? What about their sisters from other faith backgrounds or no faith who could dress as they pleased?” Participants clarified that wearing the *hijab* still meant that they dressed as they pleased and reiterated that choice was critical to such discourses.

Their sisters from other backgrounds could wear anything they chose, but they disagreed that the clothes women wore always represented ‘liberated’ choices. *Hijab* was not always necessary to be ‘modest’ – participants mentioned friends and relatives, Muslim and from other / no faith backgrounds, and from all ethnicities, who did not wear *hijabs* but who were modest. Although they agreed that modesty was culturally determined rather than a solid concept, they disapproved of prevalent social norms (not just in ‘western’ society) that increasingly encourage nudity and ‘showing of skin’ in the guise of women’s liberation and emancipation. Participants contrasted this with their own understanding of emancipation:

*Sariya: What does it mean to you, the hijab? A lot of feminist literature refers to the hijab as oppressive...*

*Safia: Oh no. I think it depends how you think because I would think wearing a short skirt is oppressing. You have to show that you have something so that people can look at you. I would say that is oppressive, that is how I look at it. I think it depends on how people look at it. I think it is a choice because if you can choose to wear short tights, then you can choose to wear the hijab. Even if you are Muslim it is still your choice [to wear a hijab or] not to wear it.*

*Safia Z,<sup>27</sup> Cheltenham, January 2009*

Safia, and other participants strongly disagreed with what they perceived to be western ideals of feminism<sup>28</sup>. These women describe the *hijab* as their *choice* and use it to take an identity-stand. By wearing it, they were taking and signifying their agency (to their societies and communities), a stance that contests mainstream notions of modesty, freedom and emancipation, and by using the authority they derived from their *hijabs* to demand their rights, they also took a stance against patriarchy.

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<sup>25</sup> Companions or supporters. The term applied to people of Medina who supported Muhammad after the hijrah

<sup>26</sup> Way of life

<sup>27</sup> Three participants are named Safia or Safiya, to differentiate between them I initial the first letter of their surnames.

<sup>28</sup> I discuss this and other aspects of what is perceived to be ‘western’ feminism in the next chapter.



So is this an irreconcilable difference of opinion between Muslim women and their sisters from other backgrounds? As I read through the literature I realised that this concern about the objectification of women's bodies was not an exclusively Muslim concern. In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft questioned the 'artificial notions of beauty and false descriptions of sensibility' that have made 'genteel women literally speaking, slaves to their bodies, and glory in their subjection' (p.47). Natasha Walter similarly criticises the 'highly sexualised culture that is often positively celebrated as a sign of women's liberation and empowerment' (Walter 2010b) and which encourages and pressurises women to prioritise physical perfection over any discomfort she may have to endure in her efforts to achieve this perfection (King 2004). Walter (2010) alleges that this is a failure of 70s second wave feminism which sought to garner for women sexual independence and self-expression, instead due to unequal power relations, empowerment and liberation have been equated with sexual objectification of women's bodies. This strand of feminist thought seems to be in agreement with the research participant's arguments about the objectification that was evident in some 'Western' women's choice of apparel:

*And the media, how women are portrayed in the media and in music – sex objects. And you ask them “why do you do this?” and “Well we are women, we are free, we can do this, we can express ourselves in this way”. They have no idea that you are expressing yourselves but you are doing it in such a way that you are degrading yourselves as well. So there is a price to pay and that price is being paid very much.*  
 Khadija,<sup>29</sup> Coventry, November 2008

This discussion is indicative of the intellectual and tactical alliances that may be possible between feminists and Muslim women on the issue of objectification of women. I think a definitive answer is not possible in this debate – there will always be dissenters who say that the *hijab* objectifies women and there will be supporters who say that it emancipates the women who wear it. In an ongoing debate that has been dominated by dissenters of the *hijab*, this research gives voice to women who wear it out of choice and who are empowered by it. This empowering aspect of the *hijab* is explored further in the next sub-section, through Muslim women's agency to further inter-community dialogue. Before that it is appropriate to end this section with a quotation from the feminist writer Naomi Wolf (2008) on the *hijab*, if only to indicate the synergies that are possible within a universal sisterhood:

I do not mean to dismiss the many women leaders in the Muslim world who regard veiling as a means of controlling women. Choice is everything. But Westerners should recognize that when a woman in France or Britain chooses a veil, it is not necessarily a sign of her repression. And, more importantly, when you choose your own miniskirt and halter top – in a Western culture in which women are not so free to

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<sup>29</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



age, to be respected as mothers, workers or spiritual beings, and to disregard Madison Avenue – it's worth thinking in a more nuanced way about what female freedom really means.

## 6.5 Hijab: a Dialogical Tool

Stuart Hall describes identity as 'the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce the subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken' to' (1996: 5). Identity does not simply *identify* rather it *articulates* audiences hailing them into existence (Hall, 1996). This is part of participants' constructs of the *hijab* as identity; it identifies women and also articulates their faith.

Participants while talking about the *hijab* attribute to it qualities that are beyond the scope of a passive piece of cloth. The *hijab* has the potential to *label* an individual and wearing it makes them a representative of their faith. This was a common theme that underpinned women's narratives as they described their initial decisions to wear the *hijab*; their experiences while wearing it; and how wearing the *hijab* influenced their behaviour in society. Participants describe being aware that wearing the *hijab* made them *identifiable* as Muslims and as representatives of their Islamic faith. They took efforts to ensure that they did not inadvertently portray Islam negatively through their actions:

*But I wear it [the hijab] due to faith and I also feel that it helps me improve myself because I know that the way I dress, people will know that I am a Muslim, people will not have to ask me what religion I follow, they will know from what I wear.*

Raziya,<sup>30</sup> Warwick, June 2008

Participants also describe the *hijab* being instrumental in initiating dialogue with people from other faith backgrounds. Stray encounters in trains, buses, in university often evolve into discussions about the faith and beliefs of Muslims as represented by young women who wear a *hijab*. Basariah, a student at Warwick University describes how her room mates were shocked that "a Muslim girl wearing the *hijab* watched TV and had fun" which led to "a big talk" with them during which she discussed the basics of her Islamic faith. Another participant mentions a conversation with a co-passenger in a bus who wanted to know what the month of *Ramadan*<sup>31</sup> and fasting meant to Muslims.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>31</sup> Ninth month of the lunar calendar, during which fasting is required.

<sup>32</sup> In Islam fasting is required during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar, during which all Muslims are required to abstain during daylight hours from eating, drinking, or engaging in sexual activity



These impromptu inter-community dialogue sessions were a direct implication of participants wearing the *hijab*. Young women were keen to talk about their faith and eager to answer legitimate questions that individuals had. They often said that if they did not wear the *hijab*, people would not recognise them as Muslims. They felt honoured to be representatives of their faith but also understood that this came with responsibility. Thus understandings of the *hijab* have evolved – from being a passive piece of garment; to a religious standpoint that describes a theological truth; then an identity position which articulates a one-sided story; and now the *hijab* seems to have been extrapolated by the women who wear it, into a dialogical tool which can stimulate exchange of information between more than one individual.

## 6.6 Conclusion

This chapter initiates a new discourse on the *hijab* which is informed by the opinions of the women who wear it and who respect it as a religious obligation. While acknowledging that in certain patriarchal societies, extreme interpretations of the *hijab* continue to hamper women's freedoms and rights, these participants show that in the British context some women wear the *hijab* out of choice. Rather than impeding them in any way, young women describe being strengthened by the *hijab*, both spiritually and pragmatically – empowering them to justify and achieve their aspirations in Muslim communities that are occasionally still culturally backward. These women are passionate about their Islamic faith that informs not just their *hijab* but also other aspects of their life including their careers, family-life and everyday routine. They are aware of the stereotypes of the *hijab* both within the Muslim community and in pluralist society and try to dispel them through their interactions with society.

My analysis indicates a paradigm-shift in the signification that the *hijab* holds for young Muslim women in Britain, and British society as a whole. Rather than being an ostentatious and visible religious symbol that highlights difference and *separates* communities (Iqbal 2007), the *hijab* of my participants seems to be actively challenging traditional stereotypes. It has evolved into a dialogical tool which acts as a catalyst for initiating discussion and dialogue. The debate about dealing with difference is pushed forward through the actions, words and conduct of the young women who wear it. Discussions about the *hijab* indicate the synergies that are possible between Muslim women's religious faith and their feminisms. In the next chapter this relationship is explored further:

*There is so much meaning that the hijab can give. I think that in this day and age it is important that I be identified as a Muslim woman.*

Basariah, Warwick, November 2008



## CHAPTER 7

## Islamic Feminisms

*“I am so happy that I am a Muslim woman and not a Muslim man!”<sup>1</sup>*

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## 7.1 Introduction

Feminist thinking has been a constant thread throughout this research. Feminism together with pragmatism informed the methodology I use and the arguments that I make. Previously, in chapter 2, I discussed my initial suspicions of feminism, and my gradual anti-intuitive engagement, first with feminist methodologies and then with feminist philosophy. I soon sought to tap into the heritage and potential of feminist discourse to work ‘through and across cultural differences’ (Brah & Phoenix 2004: 79). However, my first hesitations about working with feminism remain significant in that they are indicative of the attitudes that many – male and female, Muslim and of other / no faith – historically<sup>2</sup> and in contemporary society<sup>3</sup> hold towards feminism. Throughout the duration of this research, in texts and in interactions with participants, I encountered many disagreements between feminism and individuals’ ideologies. When it came to Islam and feminism, the disagreements became more profound and one young woman chose to opt out of my research because she felt my use of feminist methods was irreconcilable with her Islamic faith.

During interviews, participants indicated a need to garner rights for Muslim women who were sometimes deprived by patriarchal culture of what participants believed were their divinely-ordained rights. They regularly mentioned personal and social struggles to garner these rights, which may be described as feminist arguments and struggles, but paradoxically consciously avoided feminist language, often rejecting it completely:

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<sup>1</sup> Samreen, from whose interview I have quoted, has got two MAs in Arabic and English Literature. This was her response when I asked her what she thought about Feminism.

<sup>2</sup> The BBC archives website includes a collection of broadcasts on Feminism. A ‘Open Door’ documentary first telecast 25<sup>th</sup> September 1978, called ‘In Praise of Femininity and the Feminine Woman’ constitutes a scathing criticism of feminism and the women’s liberation movement, indeed it is tagged ‘down with feminism’. In my opinion however, it concentrates on a very limited and naïve view feminism and feminist methods (BBC 1978).

<sup>3</sup> My participants at Coventry University told me about a talk given by a renowned British Muslim scholar at the university criticising feminism as bad for society and the root of many social problems.



*We have to ourselves start clarifying things. We are not of a bunch of people who do not have the freedom of speech – all these freedoms aren't given to you, you have to demand and take them. [...] if you have your freedoms and still don't make an effort to clarify your stance then you are leading a complacent life. I feel that Islam gives women rights [...] The problem is that we do not recognise our rights and when you do not know your rights and demand them, they will not be given to you. We don't need to appropriate Islamic feminism from any other culture. Islam is so complete that if you properly live your life by its rules and regulations a Muslim woman will be able to lead a fulfilled life as compared to any other woman. Why? Because she has got all rights to education, she has rights to run a business, she has inheritance rights ....*

Fauzia,<sup>4</sup> Loughborough, July 2008

In most cases participants spoke about feminism only when asked, and then recounted their disagreements with feminist discourse which they characterised as anti-religion, anti-*hijab*, anti-men and anti-family (I). In this chapter I will engage with participants' opinions of feminism, including their disagreements. There are no 'pat answers' for these tensions but synergies may be possible (Al Farūqi, 1991: 23). In the spirit of feminist acknowledgement of diversity within the sisterhood, I will attempt to initiate a new understanding of feminism that contextualises Islamic beliefs, values and life-experiences and facilitates inter-community dialogue.

## **7.2 Contextualising the Feminisms of Muslim Women**

### **7.2.1 The *Hijab* Dichotomy and the Struggles of Muslim Women**

The previous chapter about the *hijab* provides an appropriate preamble for this current chapter about feminism. Fetishization and rhetoric about the *hijab* dominates feminist literature that associates emancipatory giving of voice to Muslim women with the removal of their *hijabs* (Mernissi 1985, El Saadawi 1980). In this genre of writing, Islamic doctrine and the *hijab* are portrayed either as the oppressor or tools that are manipulated by the oppressors of Muslim women (Tarlo 2010). The imagery surrounding the veil, the stories it tells and the subjugated stereotypes that are assigned to its wearers on account of the *hijab*, often deny that Muslim women have any agency or autonomy (Bullock 2003: 39). For other writers, the *hijab* becomes an adaptive strategy that Muslim women use to claim their rights (Hoodfar 2003) and their wearing of the *hijab* symbolises their agency not just as a 'synonym of resistance to social norms but as a modality of action (Mahmood 2005: 157). The *hijab*

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<sup>4</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



travels around in a full circle – from an ‘Islamic Feminism’ that demanded its removal to an ‘Islamic Feminism’ that insists on its centrality to the discourse.

The feminist’s *hijab* thus shifts from being representative of a patriarchal ideology that oppresses the woman, to being representative of Muslim women’s agency, their value-systems and their struggles against oppression – it oscillates from being *owned* by the oppressors to being *owned* by the women (Hutchinson 1987). Within these dichotomous arguments lie the multiple positions and standpoints that are possible between two extremities and which mirror the multiplicity in the feminist struggles of Muslim women and women as a whole.

### 7.2.2 Historical and International Contexts of Islamic Feminism

Islamic Feminism is a contentious term, eschewed by some Muslim women (Bullock 2003, Macdonald 2005), who dismiss it as an oxymoron (Haddad 2009), a contradiction (Cooke, 2001: xxvi) or ‘a dilemma between faith and feminism’ (Afshar 2008: 411) and which is embraced by *others* (Badran 2005; Hasan 2004). There are further disagreements about who invented the term – was it ‘invented by *observers* of the rise of a new feminist paradigm in the Middle East, who began to call it Islamic feminism’ (Badran 2005: 14-15) or is it the ‘identity of choice for some Muslim scholars and activists’ (Haddad 2009: 1) who choose to be known as Islamic feminists? This debate is further confounded by the contrasting opinions of thinkers who feel that Islam and feminism are incompatible either because:

- Islam as a faith is too misogynistic to support any feminist discourse (Hirsi Ali 2006; Sultan 2009) or
- Feminist discourse is a corruption and incompatible with sacred Islamic thought (Jameelah 2009)

There is however growing evidence of the feminist agency of Muslim women to demand and reclaim their rights. This may be associated with the rise of third wave feminist activism and thinking (c. 1990s onwards) which in its critique of ‘white middle-class’ feminism sought to contextualise the diversity within the sisterhood. Although the label ‘third wave feminism’ is applied to non-white feminist articulations after the 1990s, there is precedence within feminist discourse of articulations of diversity prior to this, for example Sojourner Truth (1867) or Shabanova (1920) and others including anti-slavery feminists (Watkins *et al* 1992) who prior to the 1990s spoke about diverse women’s rights. Islamic feminism similarly has developed not just from the thinking and activism of first and second wave articulations of feminism, but also through the work and efforts of Muslim women and men who have been active in garnering rights for women living in Islamic contexts:



- Nawab Sultan Jahan Begam (1838 - 1901) the ruler of the erstwhile princely state of Bhopal (now in modern India) who worked within Islamic frameworks to challenge traditional norms of womanhood in India and introduced reforms in veiling practices, women's education, marriage, motherhood and women's political rights. Incidentally she also funded the first purpose-built mosque in Britain. (Lambert-Hurley 2007).
- Qasim Amin, (1863 – 1908) who is also known as the father of Islamic Feminism. He wrote a book called *Tahrir al-Mar'a* (Women's Liberation) in 1899, but is also criticised for presenting a negative picture of Egyptian women as ignorant, ill-mannered and lazy and for furthering the views of the colonialists. (Ahmed 1992)
- Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (1875 - 1936), a British convert to Islam and translator of the Quran into English. He wrote against the seclusion of women and encouraged women's education both in Islamic sciences and in 'secular' subjects so that 'women may have their own great athletes, lawyers, physicians, scientists, and theologians' (Pickthall 1926: 145)
- Labibah Hashim, (c. 1880 – 1947) formed her own 'literary salon in 1906 and launched her periodical *Fatat al-Sharq* (Young Woman of the East) for 'the exclusive promotion and visibility of women'. (Belhachmi 2005: 12)
- Huda Shaarawi (1879 – 1947) who founded the Egyptian Feminist Union; who fought against colonial rule and who led feminist marches for women's rights. In 1923 after returning from an international women's meeting, she removed her headscarf in public as she disembarked from the train she had travelled in resulting in criticism and applause (Sunshine 2001)
- Nazira 'Zain al-Din (1908 - 1976), who received a thorough training in the Islamic sciences. She published a book called *al-Sufur wa al-hijab* (Unveiling and Veiling) in Beirut, Lebanon in 1928. She asserted that all Muslims, including women, were free to engage in interpretation of religious texts, arguing 'that women, because of their experience as women, were better equipped to render women sensitive exegesis' (Badran 2005 :18; Cooke 2001)
- Aisha Abd al-Rahman (1913 – 1998) who 'adopted a subtle style', didn't join women's groups or take part in feminist marches, but who supported sexual equality through her writings (Darwish 1998), insisting that women's liberation must not abandon Islamic principles.

There are many more writers thinkers and activist – women and men, Muslim and non-Muslim, who would have to be mentioned in a complete listing of historical figures involved in Islamic feminism. My aim from this 'incomplete but indicative' listing is to recreate a sense of



the diversity of backgrounds, cultures and methods that historically influenced and which continue to influence the voicing of Muslim women's struggles the world over, whether or not they are called Islamic Feminism

To return to the aims of third wave feminism, it contextualised the differences among women into feminist discourse. The Womanism of black women in addition to being a struggle against patriarchy is also a struggle against racism (hooks 2000a, 2000b, 1992, 1989; Walker 1983). Latino women's *Mujerista* is a feminism that is grounded in the faith values of its proponents (Asisi-Diaz 1989). Similarly the struggles of Muslim women constitute 'a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm' (Badran 2002: 1) and may be understood as 'the latest phase in the struggle for women's liberation in the Muslim world' (Haddad 2009: 1). But this is where it becomes complicated - the 'Muslim world' or the *Ummah* is not a homogenous group. Different cultures, ethnicities, social, historical, political geographical and economic contexts, and beliefs influence Muslim women's lives and their struggles. According to Margot Badran (2002):

Islamic Feminism is a global phenomenon. It is not a product of East or West. Indeed, it transcends East and West. [...] Islamic feminism is being produced at diverse sites around the world by women inside their own countries, whether they be from countries with Muslim majorities or from old established minority communities. Islamic feminism is also growing in Muslim Diaspora and converts communities in the West. Islamic feminism is circulating with increasing frequency in cyberspace (p.3).

In my survey of academic literature I found evidence of this inherent diversity in Muslim women's struggles that were different in their prioritisation of needs and in their articulation of demands. In **Nigeria**, Ezeilo (2006) and Adamu (1999) write about using Islamic paradigms to further successful gender development programmes, by educating both men and women about women's rights from an Islamic perspective. **Pakistani** women are exploring their own constructs of feminism that attempts to sever the link between Islam and patriarchal culture and which at the same time also challenge western secular constructs of women's liberation (Afzal-Khan 2007). No discussion on Islamic Feminism will be complete without mentioning **Iranian** women who have had to contend with complex political regimes which they have influenced and challenged, and which have in turn influenced Iranian women's struggles. These struggles challenge the clergy's monolithic power and encourage Muslim women's endeavours to reinterpret traditional Islamic theological and legal sources (Ahmadi 2006; Afary 2004; Tohidi 2002). In **India** the feminism of Muslim women emerged as a movement that 'was distinctly Muslim and *Indian* in Character' and 'entailed co-operative efforts by women as well as men for the betterment of society (Ali 2000).



A feminist group 'Sisters in Islam' in **Malaysia** is struggling against what they construe as discriminatory family laws and greater social rights for women (Archer 2007; Cooke 2001). Rinaldo (2006) argues that **Indonesian** Muslim women activists draw inspiration from Islam for a variety of political reform projects. In **Turkey**, since the 1990s, religious Muslim women have begun to 'reshape their identities and to demand participation instead of representation, and women who wore headscarves founded several organizations to participate in the political sphere and in the women's movements in Turkey' (Ozcetin 2009). Finally in the **United States of America**, Islamic feminists or those who promote 'gender jihad' want to create an alternative discourse that neither subscribes to dogmatic traditionalist interpretations of Islam, nor to secular liberal feminism that constantly succumbs to the changing whims and values of the west (Haddad *et al* 2006). Islamic Feminism hence reflects a global-local intersection (Tohidi 2002) of overarching emancipatory feminist ideals; Islamic theological interpretations; national, ethnic and cultural ontologies; and the individual Muslim woman.

Unlike Womanism and Mujerista there is no uniform terminology that these feminists use. Given the different social contexts and languages of Muslim women finding a uniform term is difficult. Whether or not they are *pratiquants* (Bowen 2007) – practising Muslim women, the shared Islamic heritage of these women and a common aim to separate 'cultural' Islam from 'authentic' Islam, characterises their struggles against patriarchy. Cooke therefore suggests that Islamic feminism, like other feminisms, 'is not a coherent identity, but rather a contingent, contextually determined strategic self positioning' (Cooke 2001: 59). As with other feminist struggles Islamic feminism movements did not always start as feminist struggles but instead were struggles against oppression of any kind – patriarchy, colonialism and war. Like their sisters from other or no faith backgrounds, Islamic feminists simply set out to contextualise the experiences of women. Leila Abouzeid, a Moroccan feminist writes:

I discovered that I had been producing women's writing as unconsciously as I had produced a discourse on Islam, not in a quest for any feminist identity or a confrontational crusade to challenge negative stereotypes about Islam, but simply because I had set down my experiences as a Muslim woman.

Cited in (Hunter 2000: 143)

### 7.3 Defining Islamic Feminism - What did Women say?

Given the diversity in Islamic feminism discourses, a concrete definition that fits the contexts of all Muslim women becomes a difficult task. So then, is a definition important? Malika a young woman I interviewed in London felt it was:



*If there is feminism in Islam, I think it is important to explain what it means. We need to clarify that it doesn't mean the same as European feminism and women fighting for the right to be like men. That is not what it is.*

Malika, London, January 2009

So although Muslim women are reclaiming their agency and their faith, the conundrum about how they define their struggle remains. As a feminist-pragmatist researcher, I felt that the best way to resolve this was to ask Muslim women whom Islamic feminists sought to emancipate, how did they want to define *their* feminism? Emancipation may be achieved by giving voice and creating a forum for this voice to be heard and acted upon. I gave voice to young Muslim women in Britain. Also as demonstrated in this chapter, articulations of 'Islamic Feminism' are often specific to women's social contexts – my asking for the opinions of young women in Britain would result in an Islamic feminism that was specific to Britain.

#### **7.4 One Definition of Islamic Feminism**

Understandings of Islamic Feminism in relation to the general concepts of feminism indicate that the former retains the emancipatory values and aims of the latter which included opening up choices and equal opportunity for women leading to a transformative understanding of their condition as part of a worldwide struggle against patriarchy (Denmark 2004). Yet the concepts, ways and methods used to achieve these aims vary considerably from the other feminist movements. It upholds the feminist values of emancipation and equality and it also factors in the beliefs and sensibilities of practising Muslim women (Jeenah 2003; Hoff-Sommers 2007). Women's rights are positioned as mandated by the Quran (Hashim 1999; Denmark 2004) and activism is often based on faith guidelines (Denmark 2004). This resonates with Malika's definition of feminism:

*Islamic Feminism – it should mean just to give women the rights that Allah has given to them. And I say this, because the biggest problem is our own Muslims who do not understand and who don't want to give their women, the rights that they deserve and that is the right for education and the right for respect.*

Malika, London, January 2009

From the standpoint of the Islamic feminists, women have their own evolution, their own identity that does not copy the patterns set by men, nor escapes from them (Waddy 1980). In this way it departs from Western feminist discourse by giving women their own roles in society and culture – roles that enable them to make valuable contributions to society, roles that are different from those of men but yet complement them in maintaining a balance within society (Afshar & Maynard 2000; Lemu & Hereen 1976).



'Islamic feminism accepts that women and men have different roles in the family, but these differences do not make women inferior to men' and do not preclude women from participating in the public arena'

Florence Denmark (2004: 369)

*Allah says men and women are not adversaries towards each other. They were created for each other, they are meant for each other and society can only ever function when they work together. [...] They have different roles in society but both work together to make it a successful place.*

Khadija,<sup>5</sup> Coventry, November 2008

This movement though conservative in appearance (Ahmed 1992) refuses to conform to the secondary status attributed to women by patriarchal society and insists instead on a status that is 'equal and different' (Hoff-Sommers 2007; Engineer 2003; Waddy 1980). Islamic feminism uses 'classical Islamic methodologies of *ijtihad*<sup>6</sup> and *tafsir*'.<sup>7</sup> In addition Islamic feminists also use feminist methodologies including the 'methods and tools of linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, etc' (Ahmadi 2006: 36; Barlas 2009). In doing this, they proceed from their own experiences and questions as women and Muslims (Denmark 2004; Hashim 1999). Based on this South African scholar, Jeenah proposes a definition of Islamic feminism which may be acceptable to believing and practising Muslim women:

Islamic feminism is, firstly, an ideology which uses the Quran and *Sunnah* to provide the ideals for gender relationships as well as the weapons in the struggle to transform society in a way that gender equality is accepted as a principle around which society is structured. Secondly, it is the struggle of Muslim women and men for the emancipation of women based on this ideology. Islamic feminists insist that they are inspired by Islam and the women heroes of Islam who stood up for justice and human rights. And that Islam is a force of empowerment rather than of disempowerment. (Jeenah, 2003: 4)

Although this definition signifies an overarching universal struggle of Muslim women everywhere, the ethnic and cultural diversities among Muslim mean that their understandings of feminism are equally diverse and must take into account specific socio-political circumstances. These feminist and others like them clearly satisfy the 'Islamic' aspect of Islamic feminism, but as Cooke (2001: xxvii) asks are they feminists?

*I'll tell you why I don't like the word Islamic feminism. The reason I don't like it is because I grew up learning sociology and feminists trying to go out and get certain*

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<sup>5</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>6</sup> independent reasoning

<sup>7</sup> Quranic Exegesis



*rights. I am all for equal rights but I think the word Islam and the understanding of the Quran gives the equality. The hadith shows the equality. All I am doing is portraying a correct understanding of Islam. I am not an Islamic feminist. I have quite a negative connotation of the feminist because of my understanding of western feminism.*

Samina, Markfield, August 2008

## 7.5 Islamic Feminism - Another Definition

There is another definition of Islamic feminism that retains its cultural roots in the Islamic heritage of Muslim women, but takes the opposite stance towards Islam. These movements have the same visions of reclaiming rights for Muslim women and contesting patriarchy and misogyny. While both these struggles use similar tools including re-interpreting core Islamic texts through women-friendly lens, its achievements leave most if not all participants in my research alienated and suspicious of its objectives. Rather than work within Islamic frameworks and use Quranic mandates for women's rights, this Islamic feminism rejects Islamic theology as completely antithetical to women's rights and gender equality (Sultan 2009; Hirsi Ali 2006; Mernissi 1985, El Saadawi 1980).

The stance of such feminism is in complete contrast to the work of feminists who attempt to reconcile Islamic faith and feminism (Haddad 2009). A topical proponent of this form of Islamic Feminism would be Ayan Hirsi Ali, who in her opposition of Islam presents it as completely misogynistic (Hirsi Ali 2006). Syrian feminist Wafa Sultan paints a similar misconstrued picture of Islamic societies, blaming not just patriarchal culture prevalent in societies but also Islamic faith and scriptures. According to Sultan, it is not misinterpretations of the Quran that lead to the oppression of women, but it is the Quran itself that is oppressive (Sultan 2009). Through my research I believe that such extreme denigration of Islam prevalent in some feminist texts – 'who attack the faith' (Haddad 2009:1) – increase Muslim women's suspicions of feminism and prevent their engagement with feminism:

*Do you mean by Islamic feminism these ladies who stop wearing hijab and this kind of things because they do not like Islam and do not think that Islam is right? I think they are silly.*

Iman, Cheltenham, January 2009

But within this trope of feminist thinking different positions are possible based on dynamic social and political circumstances. For her doctoral research on the works and thoughts of Fatima Mernissi, Rehman (2005) compared two of Mernissi's most important books –



*Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* first published in 1970<sup>8</sup> and *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* published in 1991. Rehman evinces a shift in Mernissi's work from her use of western mostly Orientalist sources in the 1970s to mainly Islamic sources in the 1990s. She feels that Mernissi's latter work is a more sensitive rendering of Islam's relationship with women, which may be a reflection of changes in her social and ideological contexts. According to Rehman, whereas Mernissi's latter work is more relevant to Muslim women and conducive to their participation in society, it still retains a style that negatively connotes Islam and the veil as misogynist – a stance that alienates many Muslims (p. 244).

There are other Islamic feminists whose writings fit into a category that is more Islamic than feminist, but whose activism garners the disagreement of many Muslim women. Amina Wadud-Muhsin's (1992) work on Quranic hermeneutics is grounded in Islamic sciences and *usul al-fiqh*<sup>9</sup>, however her activism – leading prayer congregations consisting of men and women – alienated most participants in my research who felt she was defying divine law which stated that only men may lead a mixed congregation. It is unfortunate that because participants linked Wadud-Muhsin with feminism, they then chose to avoid feminist discourse. This is where the risks of such feminism lie, rather than empowering the women it chooses to work for, it alienates them:

*For example, Amina Wadud - I don't see it as positive, leading a mixed congregation. For me that's not equality. But this is what Islamic feminism means. That's what I mean when I say I am not an Islamic feminist. The word Islamic feminist for me means people like Amina Wadud and I prefer not to use the terminology. In the wider community that is the context in which it is understood.*  
Samina, Markfield, August 2008

These thinkers, writers and activists are feminists, often engaged in bitter battles against patriarchal establishments in their communities. Although many Muslim women completely disagree with the methods they use, their arguments against 'honour' killings, female genital mutilation, and other crimes against women need to be addressed. These women are clearly feminists but again as Cooke (2001: xxvii) asks, are they Islamic?

*Then how can you call it Islamic Feminism, when they are no longer Islamic.*  
Shamsia,<sup>10</sup> Birmingham, February 2008

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<sup>8</sup> I had access to a later edition, referenced as (Mernissi, 1985)

<sup>9</sup> Roots of Law

<sup>10</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



## 7.6 The *Muslimah's* struggle

Throughout the initial thought processes that went into the design of this research process and all further stages, a key objective was to give voice to Muslim women. Early on in the research planning process<sup>11</sup> I was introduced to feminist literature. My first reaction was suspicion, "Did I want my research to be hijacked by a feminist agenda?" As I continued to read, I was influenced by feminist methodologies that involved research participants as collaborators in the research process, often in defiance of predominant positivistic methods. As I delved deeper, I developed an understanding of feminist epistemology that was different from my preconceived naïve notions of feminism as essentially anti-male and anti-religion. There was enough room within the sisterhood for a woman of faith to articulate her struggles and the struggles of her believing sisters. As demonstrated in previous sections of this chapter, I still do not agree with forms of feminist thinking that dismiss the religious beliefs of a woman, and am an enthusiastic critic of other feminisms that by pandering to limited objectives can deny other women their choice – for example feminists who demand unveiling forget that there are women, not just Muslim women but also Jewish, Christian and Hindu women, who *choose* to use veils (Shirazi & Mishra 2010).

My own previous hesitations are indicative of participants' attitudes towards feminism. They either had no information about it at all or had an understanding that they felt was not compatible with their faith. Some participants' understandings of feminism were limited. Halima is an international student at Coventry University. She decided to come to Britain to study so that she could access better job opportunities when she went back home. By most definition's, she is an 'emancipated' woman and yet she refuses to even 'think' about Feminism.

Sariya: *Have you ever thought about feminism?*

Halima: (whispers) *What's feminism?*

Sariya: *Women's struggles for other women's rights*

Halima: *I don't think about such things*

Coventry, November 2008

Halima's responses were not typical of most participants, who usually had opinions about feminism. As the research developed I identified a distinct thread of feminist thought that came up in women's narratives, even if they chose not to identify with feminism. Participants often asserted the need to garner rights for Muslim women who are sometimes deprived of rights that "Allah and Islam" has given them. Women spoke about activism, theological debate and challenging patriarchy. They questioned interpretations of Islamic values that they claimed were diluted by cultural practices.

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<sup>11</sup> Autumn 2007



According to the young women I spoke to, Islam is inherently fair to men and women, but as Islam spread it was diluted by patriarchal un-Islamic interpretations of the faith that curtailed the role of women. Muslim women need to be educated about their rights and then they must demand them in ways that are 'Islamically' appropriate. Participants insist that Islam gives rights to women, including rights to education and careers. Participants felt that they lead emancipated lives which they attributed to their awareness of Islam. Others mentioned the opportunities that they had in Britain, to practise their faith, study it and become aware of what Islam entailed for women. They contrasted their lived experiences with that of women in other non-British societies who may not have access to Islamic knowledge and who may hence be deprived of their rights. They felt that the most potent tool for a Muslim woman in her struggles is her knowledge of Islam (July 1987). Her most favoured argument in the face of patriarchy is Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) equitable treatment of women.

*Yes women should fight for their rights [...] But it should be according to Islam. It shouldn't be that Islam has forbidden something and then women demand that same thing. Such demands must neither be granted nor should they be made. Firstly, you should have full knowledge of the various rights that Islam has given you. And then if a particular right isn't being given to you, you must fight for and demand that right. [...] if you remain quiet you will never be given anything. So rallies should march, unions should be formed and other forums should be organised which can help women garner their rights. A woman should be aware of what her rights are rather than her living a suppressed life without knowing the different aspects of life that she can experience and enjoy.*

Farhat, Loughborough, August 2008

These women are content as Muslim women and lead happy lives – they are well educated, some have careers or are working towards careers of their choice, and a few others have chosen to be full-time mothers. The institutions of family and marriage are important to participants and inform their decisions and life experiences. Men – as fathers, brothers, husbands and sons – are involved in Muslim women's struggles as their supporters and confidants. This familial strand is perhaps one of the key differences in the feminism of the women I spoke to and some radical feminisms, which criticise marriage or motherhood as tools leading to the oppression of women (Rhodes 2005; Castro 1990). This also echoes in the writing of feminists such as Le Doeuff (1989) who call for feminist philosophy and action that involves men as participants in women's struggles.

The women I spoke to were aware and educated young women who were capable of making sophisticated arguments about the rights of Muslim women. These young women believed they had access to 'authentic' Islamic theological information and often spent time studying their faith. They mention reading Islamic literature and texts – online and offline, attending



study-circles and other classes in both formal and informal settings. They use this knowledge to validate their arguments about women's role and status in Islam. This 'defence' of the woman's role is often two sided. Firstly and crucially they use their *knowledgeable*<sup>12</sup> voice within the Muslim community to demand their divinely ordained rights which they argue culture, patriarchy or circumstance denies to them. They also use their *discerning* woman's voice to discuss their faith and faith-based practices within pluralist society. Their dual struggle must garner rights, establish roles and clarify the identity positions of these young Muslim women within Muslim communities as well as outside it. Her struggle is reflective of her layered 'self' as she navigates her multiple loyalties and milieux. She is an emancipated woman looking inwards at her community that may unjustifiably deny her certain freedoms and opportunities. Janus-faced she also looks outwards, at pluralist society that marginalises her and her faith as the 'different other'. Her struggle must fulfil both purposes and *give voice* in both contexts.

## 7.7 Conclusion

Understandings of feminism continue to evolve as the hybrid layered identities and multiple loyalties of modern, globalized women are contextualised into the universal sisterhood. In this research, my evolving understanding of Muslim women's feminism moves beyond woman-centred struggles and rights-based activism. Rather it assumes a more holistic approach that suggests a collaborative effort between men and women to work together to garner the rights of women and in some cases men, within a framework that is distinctly grounded in and informed by Islamic theology.

Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (1998) set out on a transnational journey to explore how women's movements in 'Muslim' world operated, and ended with views as diverse as the nine countries she visited.<sup>13</sup> She saw one difference between western and Islamic feminisms: whereas western feminisms are defined as solidly secular, Islamic feminisms are underpinned by the Islamic beliefs which Muslim women consider inseparable from their lives. I too went on a journey to discover first 'feminism' and then 'Islamic feminism'. I learnt many lessons and have undulated between being a feminist and not being a feminist (though anti-feminist would never fit). As I spoke to the young women, I too was struck by their enthusiasm for their faith.

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<sup>12</sup> The Oxford English dictionary defines Knowledgeable as 'intelligent and well informed' [http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/knowledgeable?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/knowledgeable?view=uk). Participants often used this term to describe an individual who has comparatively well informed about 'Islamic' knowledge. I use it both in this sense as well as that a knowledgeable person will *exhibit* his or her knowledge. The *hijab*, the beard, and observable faith practices make more obvious the individual's knowledge.

<sup>13</sup> Uzbekistan, Morocco, Kuwait, Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Palestine



*I am so happy that I am a Muslim woman and not a Muslim man!*

Samreen, Loughborough, July 2008

Participants more often than not critiqued feminism, but their words and actions gave clear indication of a movement towards the emancipation of Muslim women from patriarchal understandings of Islam and also from the politics of otherization which marginalised Muslim women in secular society. During each of the seven<sup>14</sup> group discussions I asked the women, “if not feminism, what would they like to call this movement?”. In each case we brain-stormed for key-words that best described our struggles. The similarity of the words the women used was *not* surprising, and the story the words told was intuitive – ‘Islamic reawakening’, ‘Reviving Islam’, ‘Muslim women’s rights’, ‘Living Islam’, ‘Practising Islam’ and even ‘Muhajababes’!<sup>15</sup>

We tried to find an alternative name that could appropriately signify our struggle. Black women had Womanism and Latino women had *Mujerista*, but with ethno-diversity among Muslim woman no single word for ‘woman’ could fit everybody. *Nisa* is Arabic and *Khawatein* is Urdu, neither will do. Finally the women concluded, maybe their struggle was not just about them as women, but it was about initiating a revival of Islam as derived from the Quran and *sunnah* – the foundational Islamic texts – and not from Muslim’s cultural practices. Some commentators may call this feminism; however for participants in my research this was a revival of that which had been lost to culture as Islam was diachronically propagated across diverse lands and peoples. Islamic feminism or not – it is important that this struggle is furthered and that its contributions are recognised.

Muslim women’s feminisms not only challenge patriarchy that denies them their rights, they also challenge secular societies’ perceptions of Islam as a misogynist faith and Muslim women as oppressed and subjugated. Such imagery is often created and disseminated in the media. The next chapter examines Muslim women’s opinions of the media and empowers them to challenge stereotypes.

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<sup>14</sup> With each cohort of women

<sup>15</sup> Muhajababes = Muhajaba (one who practises *hijab*) + babes.



## CHAPTER 8

**Metaphors, Muslim women and the Media**

*But in terms of reality it [the media] doesn't adequately reflect reality<sup>1</sup>*

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**8.1 Introduction**

This chapter records and describes young Muslim women's experiences, opinions of and aspirations for the British media: a deceptively simple statement – unpack it and deeper issues surrounding identity, communication, representation, suspicion and cohesion emerge. The last part of this chapter also links this *Voices* section which gives voice to young Muslim women with the next section that actively explores the potential of their voices to further dialogue in pluralist British society. There have been some significant academic explorations into various mediations of Muslims in Britain (Ameli *et al* 2007; INSTED 2007; Poole 2002, 2006).

Muslim women have been living in Britain for decades without eliciting as much commentary as they do now – 'Muslim women are serving as a battle ground for virtually every national debate, including secularism, religion, terrorism and multiculturalism' (Fawcett Society 2006: 2). The *Muslimah's hijab* is often construed as a symbol of her stereotypical subjugation and also of the backwardness of the entire Muslim community. Much of this symbolism that is associated with Muslim women and the ensuing commentary is perpetuated within the 'media'.<sup>2</sup> Muslim women's bodies are used to frame symbolic 'wars of words' between dichotomies that are perceived to be antagonistic – religious versus secular, faith versus reason, 'east' versus 'west', oppression versus liberation and 'indigenous British' versus 'migrant British'.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from interview with Eram (name changed on participant's request), a young woman studying to be a teacher.

<sup>2</sup> John Bowen in his commentary on the ongoing French controversy over banning the Burka - *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves - Islam, the State, and Public Space* (2007) describes the effects of newspaper and television viewers in France may have developed of Muslim women. He says, "Attentive viewers and readers during 2003 would have derived sociology of Muslims that consisted of several distinct types of people. They would have learnt that women and girls who wore the voile were objects of oppression and that their actions were dictated, directly or indirectly, by men: older brothers, fathers and shadowy Imams. It was useless to speak to them because they would simple parrot the words of their puppeteers. But women who refused (note: "refused") to wear the voile had the right to speak, because they found their agency and they could testify to the oppression that they once had felt and that their "sisters" continued to feel" (Bowen, 2007: 245). He goes on to describe three categories of Muslim men - Islamists, violent adolescents, and secularists – again as perpetuated by French newspapers and television.



This chapter becomes relevant to the objectives of this research because there is a cogent need to involve Muslim women in these discourses for which she has unwillingly (or in a few cases willingly)<sup>3</sup> become a veritable lodestone. While other research has explored the content and contexts of media representations of Islam and Muslims as a whole, I specifically seek to involve Muslim women's opinions in this debate. This chapter initiates the process by which mute subjugated cognizance (because Muslim women are *aware* of the stereotypes and other constructs appended to them by the media) may be replaced with involved active participation. As with earlier voices chapters, giving voice to Muslim women remains the overarching theme of this chapter – here she speaks about the media, the metaphors it perpetuates and ways for dialogue and cohesion to evolve.

*Rather than somebody else be the mouth piece for them [Muslim women], they need to be the Voices.*

Khalilah,<sup>4</sup> Birmingham, February 2008

## 8.2 Media, Muslims and 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001

The INSTED report (2007) explored media representation of Muslims after the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and other places on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001; Poole's work (2002) media representations of British Muslims was due to be published in September 2001 and was based on research done before 9/11. Following the events that occurred, she wrote a preface to her book to 'determine if the framework established in this [her] research was still relevant' after 9/11 (Poole 2002: 1, 2006).

September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 is often positioned in research as a turning point in the way Muslims and Islam are perceived in the media (Ahmad, 2006). The negative publicity that Islam gets is portrayed as a direct consequence of the events on that day. However, a parallel reading of the two: Poole's work (2002, 2006) and the INSTED report (2007) interpolate assumptions that negative representations of Muslims and Islamophobic attitudes are a direct result of the atrocities of 9/11. Poole's work based on material collected before the event and the INSTED report based on media coverage after 9/11 both criticise media representations of Muslims. I agree with Poole when she argues that the social contexts that arose after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 and the subsequent 'war on terror' rhetoric did not create new negative representations

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<sup>3</sup> The National Muslim Women Advisory Group (NMWAGs) is a group of Muslim women who have chosen to actively and willingly participate in some of these discourses. Other Muslim women including Birmingham City Councillor Salma Yaqoob, Muslim women activist and academics including myself have chosen to participate in these discourses. However more Muslim women voices are needed.

<sup>4</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



of Muslims. These events merely provided new contexts within which *previous* media scripts about Muslims were revisited and reinforced (Poole 2002: 15, 2006).

In 1981, twenty years before 9/11, Said wrote about the 'patent inaccuracy', 'expressions of unrestrained ethnocentrism', 'cultural and even racial hatred [and] deep yet paradoxically free-floating hostility' in media portrayals of Islam (Said 1981: 2). In a new edition, Said comments on media coverage in the interim 15 years since he first published his book, he writes that 'there has been intense focus on Muslims and Islam [...] most of it characterised by a more highly exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility than what I had previously described in my book' (1997: xi). I have referenced Said, Poole and the INSTED report to demonstrate that the vilification of Islam and Muslims is not a recent post-9/11 phenomenon but it has existed since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and may be understood as a 'modern' manifestation of the Orientalist portrayal of the different 'other'.

### 8.2.1 What is 'the Media'?

It is normative in any research relevant to media studies to state the aspect of media that will be explored. Here I explore the term media in the context of this research. The Oxford dictionary defines media<sup>5</sup> as 'the means of mass communication, especially television, radio, and newspapers collectively'<sup>6</sup> and as the plural of 'medium'<sup>7</sup> which is 'means by which something is expressed, communicated, or achieved'. To me as a feminist-pragmatist researcher, the tools of media – television, radio, and newspapers – are not as important as the actual 'communication' and exchange of ideas that takes place. This research explores the meanings that are transmitted and the processes (as differentiated from the tools) through which these meanings are understood. As viewers, readers or listeners we are not passive receptacles of media messages. Instead we contextualise and assign meanings to make sense of the messages. Not to mention the producers, broadcasters, writers, journalists and storytellers who create the messages in the first place. As a feminist-pragmatist I include human beings and their experiences as integral to the category 'media'.

McLuhan (1964) defines media as all the technologies that mediate our communication; their forms or structures which affect how we perceive and understand the world around us, for McLuhan the 'medium is the message'. Later he called the 'medium the message' (p. 26), which by altering the environment, altered the way in which humans think, act and perceive the world (McLuhan & Fiore 1967). Postman (1987) develops this statement. He says that a message – that conveys definite meaning, must not be confused with a metaphor – that hints

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/media?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/media?view=uk)

<sup>6</sup> This meaning is incomplete because it does not include the internet in its categories. While some argue that the internet was initially supposed to be a medium for scholarly exchange of ideas - A giant intranet. It has clearly become a tool for mass communication.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/medium?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/medium?view=uk)



at meaning, which we as thinking human beings derive through our intellectual capabilities. For Postman the 'medium is the metaphor' which, 'whether we are experiencing the world through the means of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, colour it, argue a case for what the world is like' (p. 10).

My discussion on media does not seek to define media, instead it seeks to clarify the narrative power of popular media to shape our world views and the categories through which we perceive and experience our world. We recollect, interpret and label as per the stories we are told. Postman reiterates the 'Huxleyan Warning' about the shrivelling of our culture because it 'becomes a burlesque' (1987: 160). Technology has become an ideology, which the common public has not recognised, but which nevertheless influences their thought processes, ideas and realities (Postman 1987). But the media is more nuanced than a burlesque exaggeration; it reinforces or exaggerates some meanings and also dims others. The choice of what is dimmed or exaggerated depends on relationships of power, authority and dominance in society (not to mention the capitalistic aims of news conglomerates). The media becomes an integral part of the dominant collective forces that form a social group's consciousness and its memory which by causing aspects of history to be remembered, forgotten or suppressed determine individuals' realities (Halbwachs 1941).

This research could have followed the precedence set by other research and explored a particular medium's – television or newspapers – representation of Muslim women. But I take a pragmatist approach to formulate knowledge through individual's experiences and asked participants what *they* thought the media was, and what *their* opinions were of media representations of Muslim women. I did not define the media for them but chose to see how they understood it. Ahmad (2006: 981) describes the 'potency of stereotypes emanating from the media'; I explore Muslim women's receptions of these mediated 'potent stereotypes' of Muslim-woman-ness. This approach is significant because rather than explore the *portrayer* and the stereotypes it portrays, I explore the *portrayed* and means to challenge stereotypes by initiating alternate portrayals. Thus I examine the portrayed's responses to their portrayal. I involve Muslim women in this discourse about the media. Let her reclaim the right to voice her own opinion. Let her talk.

### **8.3 So what did the *Muslimah* say?**

There seems to be consensus in academic discourse about representations of Muslims in the media. In her research, Poole concludes that she has insufficient data to make conclusive remarks on the changing discourses that give meaning to the category Islam, nevertheless many representations of Muslims exclude British Muslims from Britishness,



alienating and disempowering them. In its conclusion the INSTED report is more critical of the media: 'media coverage of Muslims, particularly but not only in the press, is almost entirely negative and hostile' (2007: 137). These two reports examine representations of Muslims as a whole; I asked the women whom I interviewed, what they felt about representations of Muslim women. All the women I spoke to were unanimous in their criticism with the media's handling of Muslim representations. They spoke about negative representations of Muslims as a whole rather than about specific representations of Muslim women. Often during interviews I had to exercise my interviewer's control and ask participants to focus their narrative on representations of Muslim women, which they also felt were negative and unfair. This was also ratified during subsequent group discussions

Sariya: *Does the media do justice to you as a Muslim woman?*

Tasnim: *Not at all. They all – newspapers, TV – they all have a negative perception.*

Sariya: *Is it all negative?*

Tasnim: *99.9% of it is*

Tasnim, Warwick, November, 2008

In discussions, participants' spoke about the media as a cohesive whole. Neither did they ask what I meant by 'media', nor did they define how they understood it. It was something they accepted as a real aspect of their lives and of modernity. From conversations it was apparent that for them the media included newspapers, television programming and information from the internet. Radio and newspapers were less frequently mentioned as opposed to something participants may have read or watched on the internet.<sup>8</sup> This is indicative of the attitudes of younger age groups, towards various sources of information and / or internet and their increasing preference of the internet over other sources (Lenhart *et al* 2010; Olander 2003).

These women are representative of the masses. Unlike other media researchers who as part of their methodology sought participants who were regular readers of newspapers (Omenugha, 2006) or who were aware of current affairs (Ahmad 2006), I did not recruit participants specifically for research on media and did not actively recruit participants who were media savvy. My sample was a selection of young women from diverse British Muslim communities. Some participants were media novices who were unaware of prominent and topical headlines. Others were clearly more "clued up" on current affairs and news. One participant was a 'media expert' undertaking research on the relationship between Muslim communities and the media. The relative diversity of this sample makes the overarching dissatisfaction that is evident in participants' opinions of the media more compelling,

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<sup>8</sup> Some participant's continued to send me links to videos they had watched on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) that they felt I would find useful. For example participant's sent me this link to a video in which Muslim women discuss their different *hijab* practices on the Canadian current affairs television show *The Agenda with Steve Paikin* (2008).



because their comments may be considered representative of the wider Muslim community. Below I discuss the themes that evolved during our discussions.

### 8.4 There's Nobody like Me!

Participants did not always mention specific programmes or articles but spoke about general perceptions they developed because of what they had seen or heard on the media. They felt that the media was preoccupied with a certain type of Muslim woman whose stories were recurrently told to reinforce a dominant image of Muslim women who either needed to be rescued or who was in a constant state of conflict with pluralist society:

*In terms of the media I haven't actually seen any Muslim women being portrayed in the media like me [...] I haven't seen any one like me, they don't talk about normal people who go to school and colleges and work. It's just mainly people in Burkas on the TV and that is Muslim women. That's how it is in the media. It's usually stories of girls who want to wear hijab to school and then they're not allowed [...] or the pork cases. It always shows a conflict – between Islam and hijab and everything else.*

Shamsia,<sup>9</sup> Birmingham, February 2008

Just as Orientalist representations of Muslim women portrayed them as the exotic different 'other' (Bullock 2003; Lewis 1996; Ahmed 1992), participants in my research claimed that stories about Muslim women always portray them as different from the 'norm', whatever it was. According to participants, women's abuse or so-called 'honour killings' regularly featured in the headlines rather than stories of "normal" successes or achievements. The other types of Muslim-women stories were those underpinned by a sense of conflict between Muslim women and pluralist society that signified a rift between Islam and the West. Case study 2<sup>10</sup> explores this further -

#### **Case Study 2: Refusing to Shake Hands**

Participants rarely discussed specific media stories, when they did it added credence to their opinions of the media. Some participants mentioned a news story about a female Muslim police officer who refused to shake hands with Sir Ian Blair, then one of Britain senior-most police officers (who has since resigned from his post) at a Metropolitan police passing-out parade.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>10</sup> Case study 1 on page 40 described the reactions to Laleh Bakhtiar's translation of the holy quran. She is the first woman to have translated it into English.

<sup>11</sup> (London Evening Standard 2007)



She cited faith reasons for not shaking hands as he was a not a *mahram*,<sup>12</sup> or related male family member. Participants disagreed with the newsworthiness of this story for two reasons.

Firstly, this was unwarranted publicity for a relatively trivial matter – did it need to be on national news when there were possibly other matters of importance? Secondly, they felt that had the officer acted irresponsibly. Had she clarified her stance in advance of the event she could have avoided the debate that her actions had caused.

Participants felt that this news-story did not represent them. Islam was important to the participants, but by virtue of living in pluralist, 'secular' Britain (and calling it home) they had gradually learnt to balance their Islamic and their secular lives. Participants were aware that shaking hands with unrelated members of the opposite sex was not allowed within many interpretations of Islamic texts, just as it was not allowed in orthodox versions of Judaism. But shaking hands is a socially-accepted and expected form of introduction in other cultures. Participants recognised the philosophical and practical tensions which existed between their Islamic and secular values, and in their attempts to maintain a balance between the two often made lesser compromises for the sake of greater good. Some participants mentioned that they did not shake hands with men but always clarified in advance in order to avoid causing offence. Others said they may use other gestures to show respect like a slight bow. Some others said they did not mind shaking hands with men as that was a harmless aspect of British social etiquette.

Case study 2 illustrates the two themes that dominated participants' opinions of the media. Firstly they spoke about a tendency within the media to focus on representations of Muslims and Islam that were negative either because they furthered an oppressed-subjugated representation of Muslim women or showcased conflict between Muslims and the West. The ways in which Muslim women are portrayed has implications on how they are perceived, which is problematic not just for Muslim women but also for the perceiver. Secondly, participants felt that Muslims were not doing enough to challenge this negative portrayal, and in certain occasions they strengthened stereotypes by their own actions. In the following sections I shall follow up on these themes discussing them in some detail.

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<sup>12</sup> In Islamic law, mahram connotes a state of consanguinity precluding marriage.



## 8.5 Portrayals: Oppression... and the Different Other

The perceived oppression of Muslim women is something that has become a recurring theme in this thesis. In my exploration of the literature, some writers wrote that she was oppressed (Amis, 2008); others said her faith oppressed her (Sultan 2009; Hirsi Ali 2006; Mernissi 1985) or that the veil was oppressive (Ahmed 1992; Mernissi 1985). Some wrote diktats which, intentionally or unintentionally, oppressed her (Maududi 1972; Thanvi 1905); and few others challenged the oppressed-subjugated rhetoric to say that Muslim women were *not* oppressed (Bullock 2003; Ahmad 2001). In this chapter the perceived oppression of Muslim women is discussed in the context of media representations. Participants always spoke about the oppression of Muslim women that was evident in media imagery:

*The media seems to show that the Muslim woman is always in hijab, or always in purdah.<sup>13</sup> She is not allowed to work outside; she cannot go out and must stay in purdah at all times. She cannot express her feelings to others and cannot be close to others. And that she doesn't understand many things. Muslim women aren't very educated and not very intelligent. They cannot think for their selves. Whatever they do, they are forced into doing these things either by their husband or by their parents. This is how the media portrays Muslim woman and this is also what many people think of Muslim women.*

Nazneen, Loughborough, July 2008

Comments like this were repeated through most of the interviews. A few participants were less critical of the media and sought to give credit for the few positive representations of Muslim women that they had come across. They mentioned television programming that presented to the viewer, imagery of Muslim women that was different from the dominant story of oppression,<sup>14</sup> but even these women agreed that the media was exceedingly biased in its representations of Muslim women.

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<sup>13</sup> It is important to reiterate here the difference between *hijab* and *purdah*. The *hijab* can be described as the Islamic framework of modesty for both men and women. It includes lowering of the gaze, limiting unnecessary interaction between the sexes and wearing appropriate garments - which may include a headscarf for women. In Britain the word *hijab* is often used to refer to the headscarf. *Purdah*, on the other hand, is a patriarchal cultural system from the Indian sub-continent which is exclusively prescribed to women. As per the *Purdah* system a woman is required to fully cover herself, lead a secluded life limited to the domestic sphere and is strongly discouraged from venturing out of her home.

<sup>14</sup> Some of the programming mentioned included the feature film "The White Girl" which describes the story of a young white girl from a troubled family background who converts to Islam (BBC 2008b); and 'The Islamic Retreat' - a 'reality show' which gave participants the opportunity to explore Islamic spirituality (BBC 2007a). As I write this chapter there is a series called 'Muslim Driving School' that presents images of Muslim women in 'normal' settings. As the name suggests the story is about Muslim women learning to drive and experiencing the highs and lows of the Highway Code, roundabouts and theory tests *enroute* to becoming qualified drivers (BBC 2010b).



*The media is a very funny thing. I have watched programmes where they talk about Muslim women very highly. And I have watched programmes where they talk about Muslim women in a very degrading way. So where do you go with that. I think media does undermine a Muslimah. It does put her down a lot. There is a lot of misrepresentation in the media. You have the wrong people representing Muslim women. At times there will be people talking about Muslim women and giving their opinions on how oppressed she is, but they have never once in their life met a Muslimah.*

Khadija,<sup>15</sup> Coventry, November 2008

## 8.6 The effects of Media Metaphors

What is ultimately important in the text and in the world of art in general is not the object which it depicts but the world that it generates.

Paul Ricoeur cited in (Scott-Baumann 2009: 101)

In chapter 2, I borrowed Irene Clyne's nomenclature 'Airport Literature' which she used to describe a genre of literature about Muslim women, occasionally written by Islamic 'experts', that typically tell compelling stories about women trying to escape some form of 'Islamic' brutality – a cruel husband or imminent death or imprisonment at the hands of cruel patriarchs. Clyne dismisses these books as something you buy at the airport, read on the plane and then leave in your seat when disembarking – hence airport literature. These books are not worth intellectual study, but are best-sellers and although they present an incomplete image of Muslims, they contribute to public opinion of Muslims (Clyne 2003). The media, be it 'airport literature', newspapers, television programming or the internet – are metaphors (Postman 1987) which influence people's collective memories (Edgerton 2003) and hence their opinions about Muslims. I too am guilty of succumbing to media scare-mongering:

*"I am in the midst of writing the media chapter for my thesis... this has made me think about my own perceptions of Islam before and after I became a Muslim. I remember, as a teenager, just before I converted to Islam in the mid-1990s [...] I had studied Islam from the Quran, but didn't know much about how Muslims lived or who they were. I wanted to convert but had this irrational fear of Muslims as some sort of barbaric people who covered their women in black sheets. I remember making a comment of this sort to my mother, Astagfirullah.<sup>16</sup> It is ironic that I converted to Islam a few months later and realised it was not as bad after-all. Muslims were not barbarians, they were actually quite kind and*

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<sup>15</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>16</sup> may Allah forgive me



*welcoming, and now, as a Muslim woman, I experienced the empowerment that my faith gave me.*

*My perspectives of Islam underwent a complete change during my transition from being an outsider to being an insider. Would I have retained those negative views of Islam if I had not converted? I will never know the answer to that question, but what I do know makes me concerned. Do other people, nice everyday people like me perceive Islam and Muslims negatively, just like I did before I converted? This worries me.”*

Research Diary, 4<sup>th</sup> January, 2010

In *Reporting Islam* Poole (2002) explored how British Muslims are represented in the media. Like me she contextualises her research in Orientalist representations of Muslims as the exotic other, but also says that her position on ‘representation’ is that ‘the media’ construct their own reality. She feels that media content cannot be ‘measured against actuality but rather the representational frameworks and knowledge about Islam that are produced can be examined’ (2002: 31). So the media can be judged not against standards of what is right or wrong but against the knowledge and epistemological claims to truth it produces. My participants felt that the media was producing a view of Islam that showed them – Muslim women – as oppressed, and hence deserving of pity. Was this indicative of the superior Orientalist gaze looking condescendingly at the oppressed Muslim woman?

*About Muslim women the media is not just inaccurate, it looks at Muslim women in terms of pitying them, as oppressed, it’s almost as if we have been shackled to our religion, to our homes, to our husbands, and to our family. That there is some kind of slavery bondage we can’t escape from. They look at us with a lens of pity and of looking down at us – that we are not progressing and that we are somehow incapable of thinking for ourselves. That we don’t know what happens in the world, that we have been misguided in the religion.*

Basariah, Warwick, November 2008

This ‘pity’ identified by Basariah often expressed itself in participants’ routine interactions in society. Some participants discussed people talking to them slowly or thinking that they may not understand English. This may seem to be a trivial matter. But in a Britain that has moved far beyond the antagonistic race relations of the 60s and 70s (Hiro 1991), one young woman<sup>17</sup> says that it is nuances like these that matter. A small minority of participants mentioned incidents of violence towards them or people they knew – being spat at or being referred to in racist terms – that they also attributed to negative media representations.

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<sup>17</sup> during group discussion with University of Gloucestershire participants



There was however another standpoint that also evident in participants narratives about the media. Although the media present negative imagery of Muslims, these are metaphors out of which individuals derive meaning. Society and individuals have not relinquished the reflective processes that create reality. Individuals are influenced and informed by media metaphors, but construct their own versions of reality based on their contexts and experiences:

*The media are known for stereotyping, heavily stereotyping certain groups of people. But in terms of reality it doesn't adequately reflect reality, but then I presume people are more educated about the media these days and they feel simply not to believe everything they see or hear on TV. So I think people are becoming more open-minded.*

Eram,<sup>18</sup> Cheltenham, January 2009

## 8.7 Challenging Stereotypes

During discussions participants described the need to challenge stereotypes of Muslim women. They felt it was Muslim's responsibility to dispel negative portrayals by creating and presenting alternate understandings of Islam. As a duty of care towards the pluralist communities that they inhabited these young women, feel that Muslims need to explain and clarify their religious practices:

*I think Muslim women have a duty to explain why they do certain things to both non-Muslims and other Muslims who don't understand its significance. I think Islam would be a lot more accepted in society if that was done.*

Safiya J,<sup>19</sup> Cheltenham, January 2009

Participants felt Muslim are not doing enough and said that this lack of information was partly the cause for many negative stereotypes. As Muslim women, they wanted to be more involved in inter-community dialogue and in creating narratives about Muslims that could challenge negative stereotypes. Participants were optimistic that such alternate imagery of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular could lead to dialogue and cohesion in British communities. They were aware that such work was already being undertaken at local and national levels and were willing to contribute to such work and help enhance it through their efforts.

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<sup>18</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.

<sup>19</sup> Three participants are named Safia or Safiya, to differentiate between them I initial the first letter of their surnames.



*I think there is loads of community dialogue happening, I think there is loads of challenging stereotypes. The Muslims are talking to the non-Muslims. [...] So we can combat all the stereotypes, working with people in a positive way and contributing to society and making life more positive.*

Ashia, Coventry, November, 2008

## **8.8 Conclusion: Voices 5 – Media, Metaphors and Muslim women**

Zarnat is a young woman living in Birmingham. She has experienced an abusive marriage, in her own words, “I was battered; I had a miscarriage because I was kicked. I have been through a lot”. Even she felt media representations of Muslim women were unfair. In a very poignant moment during her interview she said,

*I think the media should do research as well. If I go to the media right now, they will just focus everything on me, “Oh this is a typical poor Muslim woman who has been through a lot”. Media does not want to look at women like you. They just want to portray the oppressed woman thinking that Islam and Muslims are all bad but it is not that Islam is bad, but people and individuals within the community.*

Zarnat, Birmingham, February 2008

Zarnat’s experiences and others who have experienced abuse often form the basis of stereotypical images of Muslim women. Stories of injustices against women must be acknowledged, but not exclusively as Muslim problems. These are the shared troubles of the universal sisterhood that may be resolved by the concerted efforts of entire communities. Roohee – a professional from Loughborough – told me about a poster she saw in a hospital cloakroom that offered women advice and help in cases of domestic abuse. This poster was relevant to Roohee’s discussion about media (mis)representations, because she felt that although Muslim women are portrayed as oppressed and subjugated, the reality as demonstrated by the poster she saw, is that domestic abuse and the subjugation of women is a common problem of *all* women.

This chapter explored the messages embedded in the relationship between the media and Muslim women. While it discusses Muslim women’s concerns and disagreements with the way the media portrays them, it also takes the discourse beyond media metaphors and ‘different exotic other’ signifiers and moves it forward into the realms of perceived differences and the potential of dialogue to alleviate suspicion and further social cohesion.



## 8.9 Reflections - What has 'Voices' Achieved?

In this *Voices* section, chapters four to eight, a space was created for Muslim women's voices. The methodology for this research enabled participants' to have their opinions heard – to take voice on different subject matters that they felt were relevant to their lived experiences as Muslim women. My thesis structure incorporating the *Voices* section has aimed to examine and present Muslim women's views on the culture versus Islam debate, their constructs of womanhood, the meanings they drew from their *hijab* practice, Islamic feminism and media metaphors. In each case the relevant literature was contextualised in the discussion presented in the chapter, comparing and contrasting trends in the literature with trends in participants' narratives.

As discussed in the methodology chapters, my feminist-pragmatist research design facilitated involving the voice of the believer, as one who *experiences* and *lives* religion, into academic discussion *about* religion. By giving voice to practising Muslim women, their adherence to the Islamic faith, their understandings, their viewpoints and their *choices* were examined leading to a new discourse on Muslim women as articulated by themselves. Participant's opinions often signified a need to replace the negative stereotypes of Muslim women with alternate representations that were articulated by and for Muslim women. Participants expressed a desire and civic responsibility to take voice and reclaim their agency, to clarify misconceptions about Muslim women and thus further dialogue and understanding within pluralist British society.

Within my methodology I provided for this taking of voice and subsequent hearing of voice through the final two ethnographic stages of my research which are documented in the next section of this thesis which consists of two chapters. Chapter nine explores the process through which Muslim women took voice by creating and telling their stories. Subsequently chapter ten analyses what happened when these stories were heard by audiences from other / no faith backgrounds. Digital storytelling acted as a medium to record and present Muslim women's stories to audiences so that their voices were heard in an audio-visual format that could challenge media stereotypes. The next section through the dynamics of giving, taking and hearing Muslim women's voices explores the emancipatory potential of their voices to further community cohesion in pluralist Britain



## **Section IV**

### **Taking Voice: Hearing Voice**



## CHAPTER 9

## Digital Storytelling: Muslim Women Taking Voice

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### 9.1 Introduction – Why Digital Storytelling (DST)?

In the previous research stages I spoke to 45 young Muslim women in an attempt to *hear* their voices and *listen* to their stories. Through semi-structured narrative interviews I encouraged them to speak freely. I had envisaged the research process as a collaborative effort to create knowledge and understanding, through a shared process, and a symbiotic relationship of mutual trust and co-operation between the researcher and the 'researched'. I hoped the research tools I used, the methodology I constructed, and ultimately my thesis would appropriately reflect the nuances and subtleties of this collaborative relationship.

For the second phase of research work, I shared findings from analysis of first stage interview with participants. Participants, as a group, discussed the themes that emerged from what *they* had said. These group discussions confirmed what individuals had said, and explored how participants thought as a group. During interviews women spoke about themselves, their faith and faith-based practices, their identity in multicultural society, and other issues including the need for inter-community dialogue and balanced media representations. When they discussed these same issues as a group, as during interviews, they passionately spoke about their faith and how it influenced their everyday lives.

For me as a researcher the experiential data collected in these two stages was rich and both emotionally and academically satisfying. Throughout field research work, participants played an active part in contributing to the research findings. In the first stage, it was their narratives about their lives and the roles that they played in society. In the second stage they ratified interim research findings as derived from qualitative analysis of interview transcripts. The analysis was through my lens, but the content of the analysis, as a cumulative whole, was theirs. I often refer to the reflexive and conscious-raising feminist methodology (Fonow and Cook 1991) I use, and which through collaborative models and reflective narratives engaged with participants and their lives. As I met participants for each progressive stage of my work, they began to realise the difference in my approach from what they considered conventional research:



*Your research is different from other research - you keep coming back.*

Humeyra as recorded in Research Diary, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2009

However there was one more gap that I hoped to address in this research – the need for Muslim women to represent themselves. During the conceptualisation of this research, I realised that the need to listen to the voices of Muslim women was synonymous with the need to make it heard within the societies they inhabit. I needed a research tool that could act as a platform encouraging young Muslim women to share their opinions and which could also act as a medium through which their voices could be heard by other sections of pluralist society. I believed the voices and stories of participants had the potential to demystify themselves, facilitate dialogue and hence encourage the cross-fertilisation of cultures and values. After exploring my options and with guidance from my supervisors,<sup>1</sup> I decided to use Digital Storytelling (DST). In this research about Muslim women I have demonstrated that there is a gap in current representations of Muslim women and felt that it is necessary for the women themselves to clarify their role in society – their ‘sameness’ and their ‘differences’. It was important to use a tool that the women were comfortable with; it also had to be feasible within the scope of this doctoral research project. It needed to fit into the conceptual frameworks that underpinned this research – co-operative inquiry, reflective narratives and collective memory work.

Collective memory work forms a key conceptual framework for this research informing various research stages – socially constructed meanings that are often collectively collated, interpreted, understood and disseminated (Halbwachs 1941). Through Digital Storytelling (DST) I will attempt to add a level of memory-work to this research by capturing the women’s representations in their own digital stories and then sharing them with audiences from other backgrounds. I hope this will contribute to a new level of digital storytelling, which have been used before mostly as pedagogical tools.

### **9.1.1 Defining DST as a Narrative Tool within a Collective Memory Framework**

The Digital Storytelling Association describes digital storytelling (DST) as a modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling which has adapted to each successive medium that has emerged, from the circle of the campfire to the silver screen, and now the computer (cited in Sadik 2008). In the broadest sense a digital story would include any story that is told using digital means, so a feature film and even a video game, which engages with the viewer / player requires them to *listen*, are digital stories (Ohler 2008; Miller 2004). The ‘story’ in a digital story defies strict definition and the ‘digital’ can be almost anything associated with the information age – the ‘new’ media (Ohler 2008). A DST should **ideally** capture all the drama, narrative power, knowledge-sharing and emotive capacity of a wise old grandfather telling

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Alison Scott-Baumann and my then second supervisor Dr. Ros Jennings



his grandchildren a story while they listen to him with rapt attention. The professional master storyteller tries to achieve the same effect in Hollywood movies and TV shows when the audience sighs as the protagonist experiences emotional highs and lows (though I wonder how much of this is achieved through teleprompting!). A story engages with the listener, through narratives that are engaging and entertaining.

From the narrative enquirer's perspective, a story captures the complexity and subtleties of human experience. The stories are constantly being reconstructed to reflect the on-going personal, cultural and communal narratives (Webster and Mertova 2007). They represent a critical connection between the personal subjective experience and the larger political action, between individual and the collective (Lambert 2002). It is this capability of a story to tell the 'whole' and 'relative' truth that has interested the narrative researcher and the digital storytelling practitioner. This research is interested in the 'entirety' that a story achieves through its constant negotiations between the personal and social existences of the storyteller. This research is also interested in the sense of solidarity that storytelling can create among members of a community (Ryan 2002). Halbwachs (1941) describes collective memory as framework that not just situates the recollections of individuals in relation to each other but also presupposes them and makes them possible. This collective memory is recorded in and expressed within the memories and *stories* that societies and individuals share in their interactions. Within these stories are signifiers to individuals' and groups' perceptions, meanings, actions, experiences and temporal transitions. Stories therefore are an integral part of the frameworks that hold our communities together through the sharing of knowledge, information and social niceties.

People tell stories not just to work out their own changing identities, but also to guide others who will follow them [...] telling one's story is a responsibility to the commonsense world. [...] Storytelling is *for* another as much as for oneself. In the reciprocity that is storytelling, the teller offers herself as a guide. [...] The other's receipt of that guidance not only recognises but *values* the teller. The moral genius of storytelling is that each, teller and listener, enters the space of the story *for*<sup>2</sup> the other.

Arthur W. Frank (1995: 17 – 18)

Digital stories which are *essentially* stories have the same capacity as stories to give communities coherence and meaning (Ohler 2008). For this PhD I am interested in the opportunities that self-representational digital stories create for individual identity formation for both the storyteller and the listener (Lundby 2008) and inter-community dynamics. I mentioned earlier the broadness of what a digital story entails. I borrow my working format for DST from educationalists who use it as a pedagogic tool to encourage critical thinking,

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur Frank's emphasis



expository writing, media literacy (Ohler 2006), self reflection and effective narration (Généreux & Thompson 2008). Alan Davis worked at an after-school club with African-American youth, aged 12 to 14, exploring how DST could be used as a developmental tool for youth. He defines DST as 'a form of short narrative, usually a personal narrative told in the first person, presented as a short movie for display on a television or computer monitor, or projected onto a screen' (Davis 2004). In keeping with this definition of short 'quasi-movies' (Ohler 2008) I chose to brief participants to work towards stories that were approximately 3 minutes long (around 400 words) and that followed the common DST format: voice-over narration supported by still pictures, scans and titles<sup>3</sup> – 'scrapbook aesthetic' or 'radio with pictures' (Meadows 2003).

There is evidence within educational practice that DSTs support self reflection for the storyteller as a process of making their DSTs (Fletcher & Cambre 2009; Boase 2008b; Généreux & Thompson 2008; Ohler 2008; Sadik 2008; Lonsdale 2007). Skinner and Hagood (2008) in their work with young English language learners conclude that DST 'provides an opportunity for children and adolescents to design multimodal narratives that represent and reflect upon their lives and interests' (p. 12). This effect of DST is to engage with the story-teller; to juxtapose their emotions with their thought-through narratives and technology; and to hence create their stories. There is an occasional critique that the 'digital' distracts from the 'story'. However practitioners reiterate the focus has to be the 'story' and that just as the technology would make a bad story 'more obvious' (Ohler 2008), it can strengthen a good story. Marie-Laure Ryan (2002) argues that *narrative*<sup>4</sup> is a universal structure that transcends media and which can be evoked by many different media. Furthermore young people are increasingly engaging with digital media, this is the language they use for information gathering and also to create information (Robin 2008) and hence can engage with DST (Ohler 2008).

There is ample research about the pedagogic uses of DST; however its usage has been limited in other areas of sociology. One of the most influential DST projects outside education would be Daniel Meadows (2003) *Capture Wales* project<sup>5</sup> that was aimed at increasing contact between the BBC and Welsh communities. These stories are mostly autobiographical memories within which the 'storyteller's sense of past translates into stories that are affectively intense, and often of enduring personal import' (Kidd, forthcoming). Like with the educational strand of DST, Meadow's research reiterates the positive effects of thinking about the content, collecting the resources and then creating the stories for the storyteller (Kidd, forthcoming).

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<sup>3</sup> I did not use Music as some Muslims consider music to be *haram* or forbidden.

<sup>4</sup> Ryan's emphasis

<sup>5</sup> Capture Wales digital stories are accessible online (BBC 2003)



Not all researchers are convinced about the positive influences of digital storytelling, Boase (2008b) for example feels that the self-reflective inducing capabilities of DST are not inherent and unique to the DST model, rather it comes from the storytelling or narrative strand of DSTs. It is the narrative of DSTs, which is encompassed in traditional storytelling techniques and not the technology or pictures that make a digital story capable of causing self-reflection. Boase also feels that the brevity of DSTs may be a hindrance distracting storytellers from the processes of self-reflection (2008b). A search on the internet leads to a number of projects that have used DST (BBC 2003, BBC c.2008). Some of these stories deliver compelling and moving messages that can inspire listeners; others can be boring and uninspiring. Most literature and online sources praise digital storytelling as a research and pedagogical method (Fletcher & Cambre 2009; Ohler 2006, 2008) without considering that a method is only as good as the researcher and a story is only as good as the storyteller. In my research both the researcher and the storyteller collaborated to create stories that could make a difference.

For many DST practitioners digital storytelling is the focus of their methodologies, in this research DST is a method that is used in conjunction with other methods. Stage one and two of this research consisted of semi-structured interviews and themed group discussions designed to give Muslim women a voice. For the last two stages (three and four) of my ethnographic work I used digital stories as a narrative research method to encourage participants to tell their stories in a format that was practical, portable and brief enough for me to screen to audiences. Through digital storytelling, in stage three I encouraged participants to *take* voice and in stage four created a platform for these voices to be *heard*. Digital storytelling as a method was not important on its own, but rather its position in my methodology as a conveyor of voice made it pertinent to my research aims. In the final stage of my research I screened these stories to three focus groups consisting of audiences from non-Muslim backgrounds. These discussions broke down stereotypes, by presenting images and articulations of, and by, Muslim women that are starkly antagonistic to the *different other* imagery. Also by presenting the lives, challenges, aspirations and everyday routines of Muslim women to be the same as that of any other woman, it was possible to bring down boundaries within the sisterhood of *all* women.

This research stage retained the theoretical and conceptual assumptions that other memory-work<sup>6</sup> projects used, including Haug's work (Haug *et al* 1999) on constructs of female sexuality but is methodologically different. DST will present non-Muslim participants with images of Muslim women that are diametrically different from the oppressed and different-other stereotypes. Rather than gradually interrogate and unravel the mechanisms that create stories (as in the first two stages), I hope that these emotive personal stories will directly challenge the results or the outputs that social mechanisms, including the media, produce.

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<sup>6</sup> Please see chapter 5 for in-depth discussion on my conceptualisation of collective memory work.



From the perspective of the non-Muslim audiences, rather than encourage them to gradually first understand, and then, challenge the predominant understandings of Muslim women, my work will present images which require immediate reactions.

There seems to be a gap in existing research about the listener's perceptions towards, and reactions to DST. Through my work I hope to construct DST as a narrative research tool that is capable of capturing the memories of participants and then presenting them to an audience. I hypothesise that the capability of DSTs to *evoke the personal*, has discursive potential to actively challenge othering and interrogate stereotypes within communities. DSTs are reflexive for the storyteller; the literature claims that they are as thought-provoking for the listener / viewer (Lambert 2002). I will explore this in the next phase of my work when participants' DSTs are screened. Finally, to *give voice*, is to make it *heard* which is what this research hopes to achieve. By making the believing Muslim woman's voice heard, I hope for a society that is more aware of the enriching rather than the dividing influences of 'difference' within society.

## 9.2 Challenges, Constraints and Contingencies

### 9.2.1 Sharing Authority

Collaborative work underpins my research and I was always aware that choosing to work with this model of research would imply some amount of authority-sharing with participants. As a feminist researcher my role intentionally became more fluid as the traditional researcher-researched hierarchy dissolved into a relationship of symbiotic sharing of information (Creswell 2003; Schratz & Walker 1995) which gave me the opportunity to learn more about participants than if I had used a more traditional research model (Whyte 1981). As a pragmatist I believed that knowledge production was a function of individuals' experiences and contexts (Dewey 1958; Rao 1968). I therefore structured the group discussion stage of the research as an opportunity for participants to see, discuss and to validate my analysis of what they said during the initial interviews. However, in both stages of fieldwork I *controlled* most of the process. It was important to consult with participants during group discussions and to ensure their participation during interviews, but beyond this, the research processes and the actual work was in my control. I had to do the transcription and then analyze the interview data; and similarly selective transcription of the group discussions. For the digital storytelling stage I realised more active participation was required from the participants. They were responsible (with my assistance) to create their stories – to write autobiographical narrations and then to collect relevant visuals for their stories. It was important that *they told their stories*, and this was where I felt that control of the process shifted – rather than 'me doing the work' I had to 'encourage participants to do the work'.



For the earlier stages I gave myself timelines and deadlines that I could work towards. For the DST stage I realised that I could not give participants deadlines, yet I had to *manage* participants to ensure that my deadlines were met. High (2009) describes the process of sharing authority as a necessarily complex, demanding process of social and self discovery. My relationship with participants reflects some of these complexities. It is based on trust, shared values, and on me transferring some of my passions to them or perhaps kindling similar existing passions that participants already had. The participants who were most active and co-operative were invariably those who felt it was important for their voices, as believing Muslim women, to be heard. Only if they were passionate about my research objectives, could the objectives be met. This was more obvious when working on DST process than during earlier stages. I record this in my research diary just before initiating the DST process during group discussions:

*Murtuza<sup>7</sup> and I had an interesting discussion today. Yes I have a lot of work now just as I did when I was transcribing interviews. The difference is now I have lesser degree of control over the work*

Research Diary 30<sup>th</sup> April 2009

### 9.2.2 Participation

I also realised that this digital storytelling phase was going to be logistically more difficult to manage than the earlier two stages. My second concern was about finding participants to create digital stories – I had to have contingencies in place right from the beginning to ensure enough participation. Again I wore my target-oriented, number-crunching human resource management hat and specifically the hat that dealt with corporate recruitment processes. I hoped as an end-process to create between 12 and 15 digital stories. To ensure this happened I planned to induct approximately 45 women during the first stage of field research work. This research required much more from participants than a single meeting. I went back to the participants several times over a period of a year (longer for some participants). We shared meals together, prayed together and have become friends. A year is a long time. The life situations of many participants changed over this year – some got married and moved away, others had babies, or finished their courses at university. This was something I anticipated and so in order to ensure enough participation for the DST stage I interviewed a slightly larger number of women in the first stage.

### 9.2.3 Hijab of the Voice

Muslim women interpret *hijab* in many different ways. I discuss this in chapter six on Muslim women's understandings of the *hijab*. While most women agree that modesty is part of a

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<sup>7</sup> Murtuza Ali, my husband and sounding-board throughout the duration of the project



Muslim's way of life, modesty is a relative term, often qualified and understood by cultural milieux, as much as by religious doctrine. For some Muslim women the physical *hijab* could include covering the entire body except the face and hands, for some equally devout Muslim women dressing modestly is sufficient. This could mean wearing a longish top over baggy trousers or a long skirt or a *salwar kameez* and not necessarily covering the head. Other women cover their faces as well and a few women refuse to let their voices be heard by unrelated men. The outward appearances of Muslim women – what they wear or do not wear – is overly signified both by religious orthodoxy and by secular anti-religion polemics. I argue that other issues like access to education and healthcare facilities are more important and the Muslim woman's wardrobe choices should be left to *her* to decide.

To come back to the subject being discussed, here I explore the '*hijab* of the voice' as it became an important consideration during the digital storytelling process. *Hijab* of the voice is based on interpretations of the following verse of the Holy Quran:

*O Consorts of the Prophet! Ye are not like any of the (other) women: if ye do fear (Allah), be not too complacent of speech, lest one in whose heart is a disease should be moved with desire: but speak ye a speech (that is) just.*

Holy Quran, Chapter 33, Verses 32

In this translation the verse 33:32 refers to the 'consorts of the Prophet (pbuh) and in other translations<sup>8</sup> it addresses the Prophet's (pbuh) wives and asks them not to be *too* complacent or too soft in their speech lest they attract undue attention.<sup>9</sup> Many Islamic scholars agree that this verse refers to special injunctions for the Prophet's household as it slowly gained prominence in Medina.<sup>10</sup> It was in Medina that the first Muslim nation-state was established and the first mosque was built. As Islam grew socially, geographically and numerically, the Prophet's household became a centre of governance, scholarly activity and spirituality. The women – his wives and daughters were teachers and jurists – experts whose advice was often sought, but like any other stately households they required protection from occasionally antagonistic sections of society.

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<sup>8</sup> I have quoted from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation. I have also referred to Marmaduke Pickthall's, Shakir's and Ahmed Raza Khan's translations.

<sup>9</sup> This is an interesting concept, as a softness of voice is presented as attractive. This may partly be due to the translation not being accurate, as scholars sometimes discuss this verse as implying that women and men should be firm and to the point in their conversations with the opposite sex.

<sup>10</sup> The *Surah* / chapters of the Quran and indeed early Islamic history can be divided into two main periods. The Meccan period (610 to 622 CE), which as the name suggests deals with the early ecclesiastical mission of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in the city of Mecca. In 622 CE Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslims, on the invitation of its residents migrated to the city of Medinah (called Yathrib then). They hence escaped persecution by the *Quraysh* (ruling tribe in Mecca) and also established the foundations of the first Islamic state in Medinah. This change in the social position of the early Muslims is invariably reflected in the verses of the Quran that were revealed during the respective period. The Ayat / verse being discussed above is from a Medinan chapter.



Abua'la Maududi, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Pakistani commentator of the Holy Quran is a respected voice in South Asian Islam, but his arguments about *hijab* can be justifiably described as patriarchal and as limiting the role that a Muslim woman can have in society (Maududi 1972). In his commentary of verse 33:32 he describes what he calls the 'preliminary commandments of *Purdah*' – social reform which was for all new Muslims but which was initiated in the Prophet's home. Based on this for many (mostly South Asian)<sup>11</sup> Muslims – men and women – the *hijab* of woman's voice is an essential part of their *hijab* practice. This I felt would affect participation in the DST stage because for my DSTs the narratives and voices of participants were the most central aspects. I hoped to present true stories, told by real people, so that audiences could engage with the faith, culture and 'realness' of storytellers. The participants' voices rather than their likeness were central to the stories. This was a reason why some participants, who veiled their voices, would choose to opt out.

I also realised that there would be a few *shy* participants who would express general discomfort at sharing their images and stories with an unknown audience. These assumptions proved to be valid, with more than half the women I interviewed choosing to opt out of the final stage of the research. However a few participants also created digital stories that maintain a degree of anonymity. They achieved this by using either visuals of nature; digitally altered photographs; or photographs downloaded from the internet which were relevant to their narratives. From the context of this research, this adds and subtracts layers of meaning to the digital stories altering the messages they present.

#### 9.2.4 'Hand-bag' Syndrome

Digital storytelling (DST) practitioners mention the 'hand-bag' syndrome in digital storytelling (Boase 2008a). This means that when a group of individuals plan the content of their stories, if one among them decides s/he is going to tell a story about the contents of her handbag, everybody else will too. DST workshop facilitators have noticed when running DST sessions that dominant, highly vocal and passionate participants may influence the entire cohort so that everybody creates similar stories. This would imply a loss in the self-reflective processes that DST must entail for *all* storytellers in a cohort. I have not been able to find further literary or empirical evidence for this; however the syndrome can be ratified by research on group dynamics and the influence of the dominant voice (Krueger & Casey 2000).

When I introduced digital storytelling to participants, many were not aware of what it was and I realised I would have to show them a sample story, to acquaint them with what was required. This put me in the position of the hand-bag owner in the hand-bag syndrome. As

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<sup>11</sup> By South Asian Muslims I imply Muslims who are of Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin.



the researcher I was the 'dominant, highly vocal and passionate voice' who could dominate the outputs of the group. I could have used a story from '*Capture Wales*' or other internet based resources (BBC 2003; Meadows 2003), and indeed I asked participants to browse through stories on these websites, but only after my initial discussions with them. However, I wanted to show participants a story that they could recognise as their own – the story of a Muslim woman.

Participants needed to realise that anybody, including a Muslim woman, just like them could have a story to tell. And so to avoid handbag syndrome and to also enthuse participants I created a story that was uniquely identifiable with me and which hopefully would not influence the contents of their stories. After a lot of thought I decided to tell the story of my personal experiences during this research project and my personal objectives, rather than my academic ones, for doing this PhD; the challenges that I faced; and the successes. Participants experienced the personal tone of my narrative; glimpsed interactions that I had with women at institutions different from their own; and were inspired by my commitment to this work. My digital story was uniquely personal and I hoped this would set the trend for participants' stories too.<sup>12</sup>

During the research process we did not create stories in groups. Since participants were scattered across seven cohorts and only a few volunteered for the digital storytelling stage, when producing stories, I worked with one or two participants at a time. But the process of brain-storming for story topics was a group exercise that entire cohorts participated in. To avoid hand-bag syndrome I discussed it with participants, making them aware of the possibility of everybody creating similar stories. This seems to have worked because during group discussions participants spoke about generalised themes for stories rather than specific content. They spoke about the need to illustrate the 'normalness' of Muslim women; the universal sisterhood of all women; that they were not oppressed; that they wanted to do something to address stereotypical understandings of Muslim women; and hence create understanding about their faith. Their stories reflected this and represented the aspirations, problems and challenges that are shared by all women.

### **9.3 Field Research Stage 3 – Creating Digital Stories**

I initiated discussion about the digital story stage when I first met participants, in groups or individually to introduce my research to them. Then I briefed participants about research objectives and the methods that I intended to use. These introductory discussions gave participants an overview of the entire research process, objectives, collaborative research frameworks and a brief summary of the methods I intended to use including the digital

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<sup>12</sup> This DST is available in the accompanying USB Flash Drive



storytelling (DST) process. The consent form participants signed, when they first agreed to participate in this research project, included a statement about their interest in DST that helped me gauge their potential willingness to create digital stories. These initial discussions were useful in estimating participation and a schedule for the DST stage.

### 9.3.1 Introducing DST

During the second stage group discussions, when I discussed my research findings with participants, I included in the agenda, 10 minutes for a brief discussion on the next digital storytelling (DST) stage of research and showed participants the sample digital story that I had created. I wanted to consult with participants about the appropriateness of using DST as a tool to capture their narratives and articulate them to audiences from different cultural or religious backgrounds. This was an important aspect of the ethos of research as a consultative and collaborative process, rather than 'research by and for the researcher'. During the group discussions participants often mentioned the need for their stories to be told. While discussing media representations, discussions would often move towards initiating dialogue and they would often proactively ask me about the way-forward. They were aware that stereotypes needed to be challenged and realised through my research that they had the agency to do so. When asked, participants felt that DST was an appropriate tool for my research. The majority of the participants liked the informality, personal tone and "friendliness"<sup>13</sup> of DSTs. They felt it was a "sweet" tool<sup>14</sup> that if properly executed would be able to bridge gaps between cultures and communities.

The group discussion was an ideal opportunity to again gauge participants' interest in the DST process; to acquaint them with the general contents of a digital story; and to discuss the specific objectives that this research process hoped to achieve through creating and sharing digital stories, which were:

- To create positive information and challenge stereotypes about Islam and Muslims
- To demystify Muslim women
- To initiate inter-community dialogue.

The group discussion stage was also an opportunity to recruit volunteers who were interested in creating these stories. Invariably participants who were more committed to my research objectives than others and who had engaged with my research passions throughout the research process were most keen to create digital stories. A number of participants were uncomfortable with creating digital stories and chose to opt out of this stage. Finally 19 participants across cohorts agreed to create digital stories. Introducing DST

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<sup>13</sup> Ashia during group discussion at Coventry, June 2009

<sup>14</sup> Humeyra during group discussion at Markfield, May 2009



to participants during the group discussion enabled volunteers to start thinking about the content of their stories. As a group they brain-stormed about what stories needed to be told and then as individuals they thought about specific content.

### 9.3.2 Creating DSTs

A DST quite simply consists of a narration and some pictures which are put together using software designed for this purpose. Microsoft PhotoStory 3 is a commonly used DST software. This software rather than focus of individuals' narratives, gives priority to the photographs which must be first 'loaded' into the software and around which narratives must be structured. As Boase (2008a) argues this dilutes the narrative. For me the narratives were the central aspect and I began the DST process by encouraging participants to think about the content of their narratives and then write it down. After an initial introductory discussion, I asked interested participants to brain-storm and suggest possible subject areas for their stories. I briefed them separately (from the rest of the group) about the basic guidelines of telling a story and asked them to meet me when convenient and feasible to work together on individual stories. The stages of creating a DST included (1) thinking about their narrative and then writing it; (2) audio recording the narrative; (3) thinking about and collecting pictures that were relevant to the narrative; and (4) using software to produce the stories. This process is more complex than it seems and it will be easier to describe using a case study of my experiences with an individual participant.

#### ***Case Study 3: Creating a Digital Story***

Basariah was a final year law student at the University of Warwick. She graduated in July 2009 and has chosen to take a year out for work experience and then continue studying law. I first met Basariah in July 2008 when I visited the Warwick University Islamic prayer room to introduce my research to female members of the Warwick Student Union Islamic Society. I had sent an e-mail to the Muslim Chaplain who closely worked with students and she had already spoken to a few young women about my work. I remember reaching the prayer room rather early and Basariah was there, revising for an examination. We spoke and I told her about my work. She was immediately interested. As a young British Muslim, *hijabi* and potential solicitor, she had opinions about Islam and representations of Muslim women which she was keen to voice. She was eager to participate and shared my passions in wanting to demystify Islam and Muslim women.



**Stage 1:** Semi-structured interview - Basariah was studying and working part-time at the university, so it was particularly difficult to fix an appointment when we were both free to conduct the interview. She also went back home to Manchester all summer, then I went to India for a holiday. After many delays we managed to meet for the interview on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2009.

**Stage 2:** Group Discussion - She was keen to be part of the group discussion that I organised for research participants studying at Warwick University on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2009. She arrived late because of work, but nevertheless participated actively. She appreciated the digital story (DST) and wanted to create her own. She decided to talk about her ambitions, but needed time to properly gather her thoughts. She felt it was important for other young people to know that “Muslim women had dreams and ambitions just like other young people”, and that often as in her case, “Muslim women had the support to achieve their dreams”.

**Stage3:** Creating DST – Basariah's exams were on, after which she was going home to Manchester for a few days. We decided to stay in touch and meet as soon as she was back. After missing each other once we met on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2009 to create her story which involved the following steps:

- Narrative: When we met Basariah had thought extensively about what she wanted to talk about, but had not written down a single word. I asked her to talk about her ideas and wrote them down as she spoke. She spoke passionately, but without structure about her plans; to train to be a solicitor; to earn her living; and her real ambition to save funds, so that she could work with under-privileged children. I asked her to use the notes I had made as she spoke, to write a structured story of around 400 words that reflected all her passions and dreams.
- Recording: We then found an empty seminar room which was quiet enough to record the narrative. I briefed Basariah about narrating a story rather than reciting or reading from a text. She was to use a casual tone and add conversational elements as she told her story. Basariah did well, and her first recording was great, there was no need for further ‘takes’.
- Pictures: Basariah wanted to include pictures of her graduation and so needed some time before she could send the pictures to me.



- Using software to put the stories together: I gave participants the option to either learn how to use the software and create their stories on their own. Or I offered to put the narrative and pictures together to create the stories for them, which I would then send to them for approval. Basariah chose the latter way and I completed her story on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2009 and then sent it to her for approval, which she gave.

### 9.3.3 Unpacking the Process

As illustrated above creating DSTs was an iterative process that required different degrees of commitment from me and from participants. Participants who created DSTs were often the most passionate about giving voice to Muslim women and who felt my research was important. All were very committed:

- Sumaiya a Warwick University student had her story (about becoming Warwick University first '*hijabbed*' SU executive) fully complete when she met me 2 weeks after the group discussion.
- Humeyra, asked her sister in Turkey to send her pictures for her DST and
- Ayman scanned her son's first art-work for her DST about motherhood.

A possible critique about my methods could be that I asked participants to write down their narrative rather than use an extempore narration as is preferred by some DST practitioners. Such an extempore narration may have been intuitive and fresh, however when I interacted with participants, it was obvious that there was depth of meaning to the stories that they wanted to say, which could be lost if the story was not written down. Women had many ideas, writing it down helped collect, connect and compress these ideas into multi-faceted and layered stories. A written narrative also encourages reflection and results in a better story (Ohler 2008). Some women were nervous and having a text they could refer to, made the recording process easier. Lastly a pre-written text ensured that women did not digress and go beyond the 3 minutes allocated to each story.

There was usually a gap between our initial discussions and actually creating stories – participants had exams, other commitments and needed time to think. I remember sending e-mails and text messages to participants to ensure that they did their share of the work.



They asked for information on DST, that they could refer to and I assembled a few basic guidelines and objectives<sup>15</sup> which I sent to them. These guidelines did not and *could not* act as a substitute for a meeting with me, but only served as a reminder for participants of our initial DST discussions – the context and objectives for creating the stories. I believe that reflection is central to creating a good autobiographical story, and felt that participants needed encouragement to think about their lives, what they had achieved and their contributions to pluralist society. This is where I believe my role was important – I encouraged them to think, and hence personal meetings with me were important throughout the research and specifically in the DST stage. Between writing, recording, collecting pictures and producing the story, DST involved other work. I edited soundtracks for the narratives to remove anomalies, mistakes and unwanted sounds. I had to collect images, some had to be scanned. I created a consent form<sup>16</sup> and sought participants' consent before I could use each story.

This was one of the most intensive empirical research phases. Participants and I met often, thought and worked hard together. I experienced the usual frustrations that come with extensive ethnographic field work – multiple e-mails to fix meetings; missed trains; and endless waiting for participants who had overslept. But these delays were opportunities to reflect on the on-going research process, its successes and issues that would have to be addressed. These were ideal times to write in my research journal and these thoughts together create a collage of my experiences on-field. I have recorded in my research journal a list of places where I met with participants which includes an assortment of cafes, prayer rooms, participants' homes and a park (on a rainy day!). Some of the more unusual venues include using the fourth floor stairway at the London Muslim Resource Centre as a quiet studio to record two participants' narrations.

For me and for the participants creating DSTs was an emotional experience. I had hoped for the process to be self-reflective for the story-tellers and indeed participants mentioned that initially they had not realised how much they had to say. For one participant narrating her story was an unburdening, for others it brought clarity for future plans. For me it was heartening to see a research plan envisaged first in my mind and then on paper, being successfully implemented. The entry in my journal appropriately expresses this sentiment.

*Today Ayman after the storytelling process said "Thank you for lightening my burden" or something very similar to this in meaning [...] Zakia<sup>17</sup> through her story realised that because her negative experiences and subsequent brave actions, women in her community are being given more of a voice [...] And I slowly realised I am becoming a trusted friend for many participants [...] I am pleased that my*

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<sup>15</sup> Please see appendix I for 'Guidelines for DST' document

<sup>16</sup> Please see appendix C for 'Consent Form – DST'

<sup>17</sup> The participant's name has been changed to protect her anonymity



*research process is empowering participants through its reflexive process [...] Feminist research calls for research that is emotional, empowering and that empathises (with the 'researched') which I may have achieved [...] As usual I am writing this while I wait in a cafe for the next participant (who is late, as usual), but as I often say, it is always worth it.*

Research Diary 14<sup>th</sup> July 2009

## 9.4 The Stories<sup>18</sup>

Out of the 19 women who had initially agreed to create DSTs only 11 finally completed their DSTs. At this stage women opted out because of work or family commitments or sometimes because they were nervous – one young woman, a mother of two girls had agreed to do a story on her daughters but opted out because she was too nervous to record her voice for presentation to an unknown audience. Participants were aware of stereotypes, especially in the media, and agreed that their stories must reflect aspects of their life that did not fit into stereotypical images of Muslim women. They included references to their jobs, education and supportive families. The *hijab* was an implicit part of women's stories either because the women wore them in all their pictures or because women chose to speak about it. They spoke about the *hijab* naturally, not explicitly and without hesitation always fitting it into the general theme of their story.

Women spoke about their education or experiences at educational institutions. I have already briefly described Basariah's story about working for underprivileged children after studying and working as a law professional; and Sumaiya's story about being elected as her University's first '*hijabbed*' student union executive. Both women study at the top-ranking Warwick University and they wanted this to feature in their stories. They knew securing a place and then studying at Warwick University is an achievement to which many young people aspire.

Two converts to Islam participated in this research<sup>19</sup> and predictably their stories refer to the fact that they chose to follow and practice the Islamic faith. Leila<sup>20</sup> describes how she met a paraplegic while volunteering as a nurse. The patient's courage, cheerfulness and faith (in Islam) inspired her to study Islam and ultimately convert. Rihana<sup>21</sup> describes a recent holiday that she took with her non-Muslim family to the Forest of Dean. She describes how her

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<sup>18</sup> All the stories are available on the accompanying USB Flash Drive.

<sup>19</sup> I am the third convert

<sup>20</sup> Participant is a convert to Islam and requested that her Muslim name be used in this research.

<sup>21</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



family and she made compromises and adjustments for each other. Rihana used pictures downloaded from the internet as she wanted to remain anonymous throughout the research.

Roohi, Samreen and Ashia describe their very different experiences at work. Roohi worked with a 'Big 4' audit firm.<sup>22</sup> She describes balancing work, home and a baby. Samreen, a new migrant, narrates how she spends her day – morning prayers, breakfast and then working as a volunteer teacher which helps her grow in confidence to integrate into British work culture. She also describes parties where men and women party separately. Both women mention supportive husbands, their *hijabs* and their education. Ashia is a young British Muslim, studying at Coventry University; her story is about the youth work she enjoys doing.

Ayman and Zakia<sup>23</sup> spoke about more domestic matters. Ayman, although she has a demanding job as an academic registrar, describes the joys and challenges of motherhood. Zakia speaks about an abusive marriage, a difficult divorce and, subsequently, a more fulfilled life. Zakia too has chosen to be anonymous throughout the research and asked me to use internet pictures for her story rather than her own.

There were a few stories that are more distinctive. Ridhwana describes an encounter with an old man at a bus-stop and their ensuing conversation about Islam. She too preferred for her pictures not be used and instead gave me a folder of internet pictures which she felt “reflected her character”. Humeyra talks about her relationship with her famous landlady, the actress Jenny Laird. Chaymaa planned to discuss a holiday to Andalusia in Spain with Muslim and non-Muslim friends, unfortunately she could not complete her story because of increased university course work.

In all 11 women through their stories attempted to challenge stereotypical understandings of Muslim women as oppressed, repressed and ‘different’ and Muslim men as being patriarchal. The stories are about everyday routines and experiences. These are simple stories whose messages are deeper than initially perceived. Through stories about what is occasionally mundanely routine, women establish the universality of the existence of a woman – no matter what her cultural or religious background. The Islamic faith, as represented by the *hijab*, also has a dominant role in the women's lives and hence in their stories. But it does not intrude; rather it assimilates into the background of most women's stories. This perhaps epitomises the women's stories – they are women and they are Muslim and like other women also fulfil many other roles at the same time.

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<sup>22</sup> She has since lost her job due to the economic downturn.

<sup>23</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



## 9.5 Conclusion – A Story must be Told

In this chapter I have presented my experiences of working with young Muslim women to create self-reflective and self-representational autobiographical digital stories. Participants were briefed to create stories that would fulfil three overlapping objectives – to create positive information about Islam, to demystify Muslim women and to hence support inter-community dialogue. I believe that women produced stories that were capable of doing just that. There is ample research and academic literature that describes the self-reflection inducing ability of digital storytelling for the storyteller (Généreux & Thompson 2008; Ohler 2008, Lambert 2002; Frank 1995) which was experienced in the stories that participants produced. However a story is complete only when it has been *told* to a listener (Frank 1995; Ohler 2008) or when it is shared (Royer and Richards 2008). The audience to whom the story is told completes the purpose of the story. The next chapter will discuss the next and final ethnographic stage – I recruited participants from other faiths and no faith backgrounds and screened Muslim women's stories for them. By discussing their attitudes *towards* and understandings *of* Muslim women I hope to explore the potential uses of DST in promoting inter-community engagement and dialogue. I will explore how personal narratives of the different other can affect how it is perceived. Although DST literature mentions the listener and the possible self-reflection inducing effects of a story, I have not found detailed research that focuses on the listener's reactions, attitudinal changes, and self-reflection. I explore this in the final stage of my empirical field work as described in the next chapter. 'Narrative imagination is as much about good listening as it is about good storytelling.' (Gratton & Manoussakis, 2007: 334)

DST literature often mentions 'promoting community engagement. Lambert (2002) describes the role DST can play in creating our own lasting institutions, the beauty of which we discover story by story and community by community. In my searches to find clearer, and stronger, evidence of DST fostering community engagement, I found examples of interesting work. *Do Tell* is a project run by the Women of Color Resource Centre for military veterans so that the women most affected by policies have a voice in changing them.<sup>24</sup> An internet-blog for a course on 'Digital Storytelling in and with Communities of Color' describes the courses aims for the student to 'gain a deeper understanding of the theoretical and practical issues of digital media-based storytelling in communities of colour'.<sup>25</sup> Although these two projects explore the self-representational uses of DST, within communities that may be considered marginalised, I have not found evidence of using these stories to *give voice* within pluralist contexts. Even though some stories are shared online and available for anybody to view, there is no mention of the stories being used in the context of dialogue and

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<sup>24</sup> (Colored Girls 2006)

<sup>25</sup> (University of Minnesota 2008)



promoting cohesive societies. The role of the *listener / viewer* in completing the purpose of a story seems to be under researched.

*True Stories* (Beeson & Miskelly, undated) is another project set out to explore how a community as a whole might be empowered by the opportunity to tell its story rather than the stories of individuals within the community. This work explored how communities may be *created* and empowered through DST something which I hope to examine during screenings of the stories in the next stage of my work. While there are theoretical arguments for the potential of DST in community work, Michael Nutt (2008: 9) agrees that 'much research needs to be done to validate digital storytelling as a community development tool'. By screening the stories that young Muslim women created, I hope to:

- *listen* to the listeners and map some of their experiences, and
- analyze whether these experiences evince a role for DST in community building.

The next stage of research will complete the stories that the young women created and it will also complete the empirical work I set out to do for this PhD. I had two main objectives for this research – to give voice to Muslim women and by this means initiate inter-community dialogue. Digital Storytelling acts a conduit connecting the two objectives and facilitating both. In this project DST has already had some tangible results – women who are satisfied because their voices have been heard and a researcher satisfied that collaborative research *does* work. There is potential for more and so this research story carries on ....



## CHAPTER 10

## DST and Initiating Change: Hearing Muslim Women's Voices

*“She is just like our friend Bess!”<sup>1</sup>*

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### 10.1 This Chapter is about the Listener

This research has two aims (1) to de-mystify the *Muslimah* and (2) to thus further inter-community dialogue. This thesis until now has focussed on giving voice to Muslim women. But voice is given, only when it is heard. In stages 1 and 2 of this research, Muslim women were involved in the production of knowledge about themselves, as presented in the *Voices* section of this thesis. Subsequently in stage 3, digital storytelling was used as a narrative methodological tool to record Muslim women's stories in a format that could be used to initiate dialogue. These stories present compelling alternative images of Muslim women that challenge stereotypes. By making them available to audiences from various socio-cultural backgrounds, I explored the potential of Muslim women's stories to further inter-community dialogue.

In the 'Introduction' to this thesis I wrote about 'the danger of a single story' that disempowers groups and individuals by presenting a one-sided, politically-skewed and incomplete story (Adichie 2009). But when they are *told* by marginalised groups, stories can empower the disempowered, dismantle stereotypes and facilitate understanding of 'difference' in pluralist societies. From a feminist ontology, stories theoretically give voice to the storyteller to tell her / his own story. The pragmatist aspects of this research acknowledge the potential of stories to emphasise the diversity of human experiences and their multiple realities. As more groups tell their story, and these stories are *heard*, a more complete and complex picture of shared reality is created.

#### 10.1.1 Stage IV: Screening Digital Stories

The previous chapter documents the self-reflexive process through which 11 participants created their digital stories. Whether 'digital' or not, storytelling telling is the same ancient art that requires narrative coherence, an emotive plot and enthralled listeners – a story is

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<sup>1</sup> Comment made by a participant in Focus Group 1 – 1<sup>st</sup> October 2009. The name 'Bess' has been changed to ensure anonymity



incomplete if it is not told. In the last chapter I explored the teller's experiences; here I shall examine the listener's experiences and the potential of stories to bring change in listeners' perceptions of storytellers. Stage four consisted of screening the DSTs to three focus groups of individuals from other / no faith backgrounds. Through the screening of participants' digital stories (DST) I explored changes in audience's perceptions of Muslim women as a result of watching their stories. Focus group discussions resulted in rich qualitative data. A 5-point Likert scale (appendix J) was also used to measure participants' perceptions of Muslim women before and after DST screenings.

For this stage of the research, I was working with a new set of participants. The anxieties I experienced in the earlier stages of this research again resurfaced. There were also new anxieties. Firstly, access was a concern – I worked with gatekeepers at the University of Gloucestershire to access student cohorts, access to a third group was through social contacts who acted as gatekeepers. Secondly, the politics of this stage were different. The earlier stages involved giving voice to Muslim women who arguably did not have a voice, for example to counter negative media coverage. Muslim women were usually keen and eager for their voices to be heard, and were enthusiastic participants in my research – this was about them. Participants in stage four were required to hear these voices and stories that were *about others*. Would these participants be as enthusiastic in their participation? Finally I hoped that Muslim women's digital stories could clarify to non-Muslim audiences the diversity in the category 'Muslim woman'; the shared aspects of the universal sisterhood and build bridges between perceived 'us' and 'them'. Screening the stories and the ensuing discussions would provide an indication of the possibility of potential bridges. This was the final stage of my ethnographic work which had its own set of challenges:

*I am worried; I had felt that the last research stage (research stage 3) was out of my control. What about this one? What if nobody wants to listen to my DSTs? What if I find no participants at all? Will the stories make a difference? Will they be worth the effort that the girls put in? I have made many theoretical assumptions about these stories, and their potential to bring about positive change. I hope it all holds. Only time will tell.*

Research Diary, 8<sup>th</sup> September, 2009

## **10.2 Simulating Personal Encounters using DST and Focus Group Discussions**

Focus group discussions usually consist of questions designed to concentrate discussion on the specific subject that is under investigation (Krueger & Casey 2000). In this research the questions are replaced by Muslim women's digital stories which focus the audiences' attention on Muslim women's experiences of their womanhood. Individuals' understandings



of Muslim women and ways through which these understandings may be altered were explored. The screening of DSTs simulated personal encounters between Muslim women and others. To go back to Adichie's metaphor about the danger of the single story to label a group (2009), DSTs create an opportunity for another story to be told, this time by Muslim women themselves.

Digital stories (DSTs) were used as tool to explore the potential of personal narratives in facilitating greater understanding about difference within pluralist communities. DSTs cannot in the long run be a substitute to personal contact and interaction, but in this research presented an alternative story of Muslim women that contested dominant media imagery of the oppressed-subjugated Muslim women, replacing stereotypes with Muslim women's voices and perspectives. By using DSTs I also set the expectations of the focus group participants – they were aware that they had to watch Muslim women's stories and discuss difficult issues surrounding stereotyping, prejudice and citizenship. Using the focus group format also meant that participants knew they had to 'focus' their discussion on Muslim women.

By using DST and avoiding the presence of Muslims in the group, I tried to create an environment in which participants were relatively comfortable to share their opinions without being concerned about political correctness or inadvertently causing offence, which was possible given the sensitivity of the discussion. Although I am a *hijabbed* visible *Muslimah*, in order to make focus groups participants comfortable, I also emphasised my role as an academic researcher who was keen to further intercommunity dialogue.

### 10.3 Organising the Focus Groups

**Group 1** were studying for their Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) specialising in Religious Education. Their tutor allowed me 20 minutes to introduce my research during a class. I spoke to this group about my research objectives – initiate alternate understandings of Muslim women and hence further inter-community dialogue. The group responded enthusiastically. They were happy to stay back after class hours to participate in my research. These students were training to be teachers, and realised that in the future they may have Muslim students. They considered it important to understand more about British Muslims for which this research provided an ideal opportunity. Their tutor agreed to give up an hour from a teaching session for me to conduct my research process. In return I was to spend some time answering student's questions about Islam. Due to the existing gender distribution in this class, this group consisted of both male and female participants.



**Group 2** consisted of the female members of the Cheltenham Interfaith (CIF) – a group of individuals dedicated to the study of faith in pluralist Britain. I first discussed my research with the chair of the group and then spent an hour with two female members to discuss the arrangements that were necessary to organise the screening and discussion. I sent out invitation letters explaining my research objectives and details of the meeting to all female members of CIF. Many responded expressing their interest and few wanted to bring friends and family. In all 16 women attended the focus group discussion. This group consisted mostly of older women from various Christian backgrounds and one Jewish woman.

My meeting with **Group 3** was organised by a colleague who is a tutor in the education department. He included my research process as a special session for his students taking a 'Diversity in Education' module. I met this group for the first time on the day of the screening. I was initially unsure about this group's expectations from my research. Also this group did not know anything about me except that I was a guest lecturer for the day. This group consisted of 11 students including a Muslim woman (for quantitative analysis this group consists of 7 participants as 4 participants arrived late and did not fill the 'before' questionnaire). We had a lively discussion which lasted longer than for other groups. When I asked this group if they considered religion important – none of them did except the Muslim woman. Like Group 1 and for the same reason, this group too consisted of both male and female participants.

I organised three separate screenings for each group of participants. There were possibilities for more screenings but I had collected sufficient data from the first three. In the interests of feasibility and meeting timelines, in consultation with my supervisors I decided to postpone future screenings until after PhD submission. For each group, stories to be screened were selected based on perceived understandings of the group's interests.

**Table 2: Stories Screened to each group**

Group	Name	Stories Screened
<b>Group I</b>	PGCE Students	Basariah, Ayman, Humeyra, Sumaiya*
<b>Group II</b>	Cheltenham Interfaith female	Zakia, <sup>2</sup> Basariah*, Ayman, Samreen
<b>Group III</b>	BA Education students	Roohi, Ridhwana, Humeyra
* For all three groups, it was decided to screen three stories each. However as per the group discussions and depending on the time available I screened extra stories.		

Each group had preconceptions about Muslim women, but all of them were eager to participate in this process to break down barriers of (in)difference. Their eagerness is commendable as it is indicative of a desire to understand and celebrate the diversity that constitutes modern Britain. Although they did not constitute a statistically significant sample, there was considerable diversity in the groups – young and older people; those to whom

<sup>2</sup> Name changed because participant wanted to remain anonymous.



religion was important and those to whom it was not; men and women; individuals who had prior interactions with Muslims and those who had not had any access at all; and students, employees and pensioners.

### 10.4 Reactions to Muslim Women's Stories

In all, nine stories were screened to the three different audiences. Participants' reactions to Muslim women's stories and the ensuing discussions presented rich data on the potential of personal narratives to further understanding between different communities and particularly in dispelling the stereotypes of Muslim women. Below are participants' reactions to each story that they saw:

**Table 3: Reactions to Ayman's Digital Story**

<i>Ayman describes two miscarriages and the joys and challenges of motherhood in her story</i>	
<p><b>Group I</b></p> <p><b>PGCE Religious Education Students</b></p>	<p>After this group watched Ayman's story there was complete silence in the room. When I asked the reasons for this silence, a participant replied that it was perhaps because they were British and had stiff upper lips and that they did not want to display their emotions in public. This comment lightened the environment and conversation resumed.</p> <p>The group was moved by Ayman's description of her miscarriages as 'opportunities to be a mother' and noted that Ayman's husband and older child helped her recover from her traumatic experience. They felt Ayman's story was indicative of strong family values in Muslim communities. Parents were willing to make sacrifices for their children, which was not always the case in <i>white British</i> society. This was almost a unanimous opinion and when some students disagreed, the discussion threatened to drift into various tabloid reports of individual's having children to avail of child-care benefits. At this point I intervened and clarified that not everybody had babies for benefits, which the group agreed with.</p> <p>During this discussion, I found some participants' usage of the term <i>white British</i> thought-provoking. While making a point, a participant hesitatingly used the word 'British' to distinguish from Muslims, but seemed unsatisfied with this distinction. After a short pause the participant used the term 'white British' to distinguish from 'other British'. This satisfied the participant and also other members of her group who thereafter used the same distinction. To me this signified a conscious acknowledgement of the diversity within the category 'British'. By her choice of words the speaker and subsequently the entire group accepted that people of different races and religions are an integral part of the category 'British'.</p>
<p><b>Group II</b></p> <p><b>Cheltenham Inter-faith</b></p>	<p>Group II was impressed with Ayman's faith and one listener commented that such powerful faith was not often possible in Christian contexts. She drew strength from her faith. This group reacted very differently to Ayman's miscarriages, as compared to the last group. They wondered if her miscarriages caused problems with her in-laws</p>



	<p>because of cultural stigmas. This group asked questions about Muslims living in extended families and effect of arranged marriages, which I spent sometime answering. The women also discussed the segregation of the sexes prevalent in Muslim societies.</p> <p>One listener felt that segregation could mean that some amount of knowledge was lost from both sides because men and women perceived things differently. Another woman however made a point that even though there is no 'forced' segregation in white British society, they 'still do it' – 'women like to be together' She described how she had a house group that was all female. They were comfortable because they could talk about things they would not be able to talk about when there were men around.</p>
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**Table 4: Reactions to Basariah's Digital Story**

<p><i>Basariah's 'Baz' was a law student from Warwick University who had just graduated. Her story is about her plans to work as a law professional for a few years and then switch to working for underprivileged children.</i></p>	
<p><b>Group I</b> <b>PGCE Religious Education Students</b></p>	<p>Group I as a whole were impressed with Basariah's story. They felt she was conscientious and disciplined, and had thought about how she wanted to live her life, perhaps more so than any of them had. They liked her – she was friendly, confident, and ambitious and, like them, partied with her friends. She reminded the group of their friend Bess<sup>3</sup> who had not come to class that day - "She's just like our friend Bess". 'Baz' was like Bess; she was just like any one of them. They also saw that Islam and her relationship with God were important to Basariah and that she drew strength and inspiration from her beliefs.</p>
<p><b>Group II</b> <b>Cheltenham Inter-faith</b></p>	<p>I screened Basariah's story to group II even though this was not part of my initial plan. In her story Basariah demonstrates that she is a devout Muslim woman who also has clear career plans. Her story contrasted with an opinion expressed within this group that young Muslims have to choose either Islam or a 'western' way of life and cannot balance both. The group enjoyed Basariah's story and after the screening there were audible "wows" from the audience. They were impressed with her, and said that the narrator could as much have been a Christian or a Jewish girl with very strong faith. She had been encouraged and supported by her family who are clearly important to her – Basariah mentions being inspired by her father. One member of the audience commented that Basariah had knowledge of her Islamic faith and drew strength from it.</p>

<sup>3</sup> Name changed to assure anonymity.



**Table 5: Reaction's to Humeyra's Digital Story**

<i>Humeyra's story is an emotional account about her relationship with the actress Jenny Laird who was her landlady when she lived in London. Her friendship with Jenny taught her that, "it is not religion or culture that creates great bonds between people but it is understanding, openness and mutual respect".</i>	
<b>Group I</b> <b>PGCE</b> <b>Religious</b> <b>Education</b> <b>Students</b>	For Group I, Humeyra's story was a relief being screened immediately after Ayman's story which had moved them emotionally. Humeyra was visibly committed to inter-faith dialogue and to her Islamic faith, participants considered her story appropriate for my research. One participant made the point that all three girls Basariah, Ayman and Humeyra referred to God as 'God' rather than Allah. This made them seem more approachable and friendly because it was evident that all three Muslim women believed in the same God as the group. They felt that if more people were as dedicated to cohesion and dialogue as Humeyra was, British society would be nicer place.
<b>Group III</b> <b>BA</b> <b>Education</b> <b>Students</b>	Group III was keen to watch another story and so to close the day's proceedings I showed them Humeyra's story. The group enjoyed Humeyra's story a lot, they felt that it was an "important" story that "showed the meeting of the cultures". One young woman commented that Humeyra's story showed that she was grateful for what British society had given her and that she was keen to integrate. Another participant felt that Humeyra was much more committed to promoting dialogue and understanding between different communities than other people including themselves.

**Table 6: Reactions to Ridhwana's Digital Story**

<i>In her story Ridhwana describes an encounter with an old man at a bus-stop and their ensuing conversation about Islam.</i>	
<b>Group III</b> <b>BA</b> <b>Education</b> <b>Students</b>	<p>Group III enjoyed Ridhwana's story. Ridhwana's story includes an image that described her relationship with the <i>hijab</i>, "I wear what I wear, not because I am forced to, but so that people see me for who I am as a person rather than what I look like". This impressed members of the audience who admitted they had not realised how strongly Muslim women felt about their <i>hijab</i> – they had always thought the <i>hijab</i> was something Muslim women were forced to wear. They commented that she was approachable and was happy to talk about her faith to the stranger she met at the bus-stop.</p> <p>This group also spoke about constructs of Britishness. After Ridhwana's story had been discussed for a few minutes, one person hesitatingly made a comment that he felt Ridhwana and her story were inherently British. I was intrigued by this reference to Ridhwana's Britishness and asked the group to discuss this – "What is Britishness? What makes Ridhwana's story British?" The group's responses were representative of the complexities inherent in defining Britishness. Participant's felt that Ridhwana was civic-minded, because she threw her crisp wrapper in the bin, she was polite – she said thank you, like them she ate crisps and she queued for the bus (queuing was</p>



	<p>definitely British!). Ridhwana was just like them – she was career-conscious, internet savvy and ate crisps.</p> <p>The group's answers may be perceived as naïve and not well thought out, but are significant because they attempt to provide a real answer by a group of undergraduates thinking about Britishness – an issue that many academics continue to debate.</p>
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**Table 7: Reactions to Roohee's Digital Story**

<i>Roohee's story is about her schedule and her job with a with a 'Big 4' audit firm</i>	
<p><b>Group III</b> <b>BA</b> <b>Education</b> <b>Students</b></p>	<p>The group felt that Roohee's story reflected that of any woman - British, Muslim or otherwise. She had worked through her education and was now enjoying a successful career, something that all of them aspired to achieve. Like other women she had to multi-task – managing her home, her baby and her family. It was clear that her faith was very important to her because she chose to pray and wear the <i>hijab</i> at work. It was also clear that the organisation she worked with was committed to diversity within its work force which made it easy for her to practice her faith.</p>

**Table 8: Reactions to Samreen's Digital Story**

<i>Samreen's story is entitled "A day - my story". She speaks about her daily routine and experiences as a trainee teacher</i>	
<p><b>Group II</b> <b>Cheltenham</b> <b>Inter-faith</b></p>	<p>The group commented about Samreen's accent. They wanted to know how long she had been in Britain. Samreen's story raised a number of thought-provoking questions which I had to answer. "Do you talk about men when you meet as a group of women?", "Do you wear the <i>hijab</i> when you are all women?" and "What do you think about western ways of dressing?" The woman who asked the last question said she too did not like the more immodest clothes that some women wore and wondered aloud what the covered modest Muslim woman would think of such dressing styles.</p>



**Table 9: Reactions to Somaiya's Digital Story**

<i>Somaiya's story was about being elected as her University's first 'hijabbed' student union executive.</i>	
<b>Group I</b>  <b>PGCE Religious Education Students</b>	<p>Group I found Somaiya's story thought-provocative. Everybody appreciated that she had stepped out of her comfort zone to participate in union politics, as this meant that she engaged with students from different backgrounds and cultures and not just Muslims. But the group was divided in their reactions to Somaiya's assertive stance on her Islamic faith, particularly her avoidance of alcohol.</p> <p>Half the group felt that she was too assertive about her faith, that she had 'enforced' an alcohol-free kitchen during the training programme that Somaiya mentions in her story. They also felt that she should have agreed to meetings in a pub, because she was the only one who was uncomfortable. They felt it was unfair, that because of one person, the entire group had to avoid alcohol – perhaps this was why there was limited interaction between Muslims and others.</p> <p>The other half of the group felt that her assertiveness about her faith was commendable. They pointed out that she had not enforced the alcohol-free kitchen but that her colleagues had voluntarily offered to keep the kitchen alcohol free. Somaiya was happy and proud to be Muslim and did not hesitate in standing by her belief. This half of the group felt that they did not find such passion for religion and religious values in other faiths, including their own. This was something they felt other faiths could emulate Muslims, because "faith is part of your identity and there is no need to be ashamed of it".</p>

**Table 10: Reactions to Zakia's <sup>4</sup> Digital Story**

<i>Zakia spoke about an abusive marriage, a difficult divorce and a subsequently more fulfilled life.)</i>	
<b>Group II</b>  <b>Cheltenham Inter-faith</b>	<p>Participants in Group II were impressed with Zakia's faith and strength. They felt she was a strong woman who knew her faith and drew confidence from it. This group also felt that Zakia's story could be true for a woman from any faith background – her struggle was common across womankind. Some women admitted that they had only heard about the authoritarian and patriarchal side of Islam, and had assumed that it would be difficult for a Muslim woman to initiate divorce proceedings. The support Zakia had from her family during and after her divorce, surprised many participants. A last comment made about Zakia's story was that she valued education and had decided to go back into education as a mature student to rebuild her life after her divorce.</p>

<sup>4</sup> Name changed to protect participant's identity



## 10.5 'Before and After' Analysis

Through focus group discussions, I measured participant's perceptions of Muslim women before and after the DST screenings using a 5-point Likert scale to measure participant's attitudes towards Muslim women before and after the screening. Each questionnaire consisted of 16 questions that respondents rated on a 5 point scale ('strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') which were assigned values 1 to 5 (Uebersax 2006).<sup>5</sup> By comparing the difference between the sum of participants' scores before and after the screenings, I was able to examine if there was any change in participants' perceptions of Muslim women after watching the stories.<sup>6</sup> The Likert scale I used was not a validated instrument. Based on my survey of the literature, discussions with Muslim women and my supervisors, I created it as a tool to use in conjunction with qualitative analysis of focus group discussions. On its own the results from the scale are at best only indicative. I used a mixed method approach that juxtaposed qualitative data from the focus group discussions with quantitative data from the questionnaire results. Here the before and after reactions for each group are discussed.

### 10.5.1 Focus Group I - PGCE students - 1<sup>st</sup> October 2009

This group was one of the most enthusiastic. They believed that as future teachers it was their duty to know more about Islam and Muslims. Watching the DSTs gave them an opportunity to better understand the cultural milieu of any future Muslim students they may have. This group also had a natural interest in religion hence their choice to specialise in Religious Education for their PGCE course. They shared similar values of religiosity and belief in God with the young Muslim women whose stories they were listening to.

#### BEFORE

Some participants in this group had interacted with Muslims. One young woman had lived in Turkey and insisted that it was not possible to generalise opinions of Muslim women as oppressed. Since she had lived in close proximity with Muslim women, and had friends who were Muslim she had a more nuanced understanding of Muslims and their beliefs – there were some Muslim women who did not have certain rights, there were others who did. A young man originally from Burma mentioned that some of his friends, who were earlier alcoholics, drug addicts and womanisers (!), had converted to Islam after coming into contact with Islamic preachers. (Although he was not considering conversion) he was impressed with the positive effect Islam had for his friends who were now more disciplined and back in education. He was curious why people convert to Islam and had researched this online. He was perplexed that a religion that was supposedly oppressive to women (and men) was

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<sup>5</sup> See appendix J for Likert Scale

<sup>6</sup> Appendix K contains the raw data from the questionnaires



attracting many female converts. Others in the group had Muslim friends or students in their local communities. Some had not interacted with Muslims at all.

Although they acknowledged the stereotyping of Muslim women prevalent in the media, they said that they did not have access to other stories of Muslim women. This they felt was a problem. They did not know if Muslim women were allowed to study and have careers. They were curious about Muslim practices like wearing the headscarf and covering the face about which they did not have any information, except what they gained from the media. They said they could understand why in some cases the 'oppressed' stereotypes of Muslim women could dominate people's impressions of Muslim women. Due to the lack of alternative information about Muslim women, this group was unsure how to perceive Muslim women, they agreed that the oppressed stereotype was not true but were uncertain what to replace it with.

### **AFTER**

This group saw Basariah, Ayman, Humeyra and Sumaiya's stories. In addition to clarifying the multifarious roles and personalities that Muslim women can have, this discussion showcased an acknowledgement and acceptance of the diversity that today constitutes Britain. As part of the dialogue process they displayed willingness to:

- engage with 'difference' that they did not understand – in this case the Muslim women, their lives and faith values;
- discuss aspects of a storyteller's beliefs that they did not agree with as was evident in their reaction to Somaiya's story and her strict avoidance of alcohol; and
- learn from another's group's examples which was evident in their praise for Muslim family values after watching Ayman's story

For group one, 10 out of 11 (91%) participants measured a positive change on their questionnaire responses. On 1<sup>st</sup> October 2009, I had organised two focus group discussions – this one and the next one with female members of Cheltenham Interfaith group. After months of being uncertain about the outcome of my research I was satisfied that the effort involved in creating the DSTs had been worthwhile. Many places in my diary record my satisfaction at working with young Muslim women who told me their stories. Now the months of waiting to run these dialogue groups had paid off - the *Muslimah* told her own story.

*"Thank you God for the opportunity to do this."*

Research Diary, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2009.



### 10.5.2 Focus Group II - Cheltenham Interfaith female members - 1<sup>st</sup> October 2009

Cheltenham Interfaith is actively engaged in various inter-community dialogue activities. As always the woman's voice is not always dominant in such activities. She is part of the audience and she may ask prudent questions, but dialogue events usually involve a male speaker discussing important issues that pertain to both men and women. This event was about women and was run completely by women.

#### BEFORE

As with the PGCE students, this group too felt that the media was unfairly representing Muslim women (and Muslims) by indulging in a lot of "scaremongering". The media portrayed Muslim women as downtrodden which may be true for some women but definitely was not true for all. This group said that Muslims and especially practising<sup>7</sup> Muslims did not support integration because they kept to themselves and limited their interactions to Muslim communities.

During the discussions, one woman brought up an incident that occurred at a school where her son is head-teacher. A teacher in the school asked a bright Muslim student what she wanted to be when she grew up. The girl replied that she wanted to be a teacher but that her father told her she never will. This incident upset the woman, especially as staff members at the school were not aware of what could be done to rectify the situation. As the women discussed this incident among themselves, they came to the conclusion that having more Muslim teachers, to act as role models for the children and to liaise with parents could be one way of avoiding such issues in the future. The woman who brought up this incident clarified that there were no Muslim teachers in her son's school.

This caused another participant to make a point that Muslims who became teachers and lawyers never bore outwards signs of being Muslims. Educated Muslims and Muslims who were professionals did not wear *hijabs* and had no qualms about going to the pub, even if they did not drink. She felt young British Muslims were being forced to choose between either being 'Western' or being 'Muslim' and this was perhaps where radicalisation was taking place. There was lively discussion around this subject and participants came to the conclusion that a balance was needed. A Jewish woman pointed out that it was possible for people of faith to successfully balance their faith values and secular lives, as in the case of her faith community. She also said that these successes did not make media headlines.

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<sup>7</sup> As earlier I use the term practising to refer to Muslims who adhere to all Islamic principles including praying five times a day; fasting in Ramadan; *hijabs* for women, etc



**AFTER**

This group viewed four digital stories: Zakia<sup>8</sup>, Basariah, Ayman, and Samreen. With this group I often found myself answering women's questions about Muslim women. Some questions were poignant and others made the entire group laugh at their naivety.

Participants' reactions to the stories included discussions about:

- the commonalities of women's lives and struggles – in Zakia's difficult divorce, Ayman's inspiration tale of motherhood and Basariah's ambitions they saw parallels in their own lives.
- the protagonist in all four stories were strong women who drew strength from their Islamic faith
- young British Muslims were balancing their Britishness and Muslimness especially evident in Basariah's story
- In Samreen's story about a new life in Britain as a immigrant, they were impressed with the efforts she was taking to fit into and contribute to British society

According to my quantitative analysis 69% of participants in this group evinced a positive change in their perceptions of Muslim women after the screening of the digital stories. There was a void in current representations and information about Muslim women. In the *Voices* section, Muslim women recognised the existence of this void and suggested that the Muslim community, including themselves needed to be more active and tell alternate stories of Islam and Muslims. The women from Cheltenham Interfaith, who were from diverse religious groups, suggested the same need for more information about Muslim women.

The overwhelming learning point in this focus groups discussion, for the participants and for me, was the commonality of women struggles and perspectives irrespective of religious, ethnic, cultural differences. To borrow from Robin Morgan the sisterhood is *truly* powerful (Morgan, 1970).

### **10.5.3 Focus Group III - BA Education students - 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009**

Group III consisted of 11 students including a young Muslim woman. This was the first time I met this group and so had to spend considerable time explaining my research to them. There were a few logistical problems during this focus group. A number of students were late and missed my introduction to the research, which I had to succinctly repeat. These students

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<sup>8</sup> Zakia's name has been changed to maintain her anonymity



also could not fill the 'before' questionnaire, so that I only had 7 complete datasets for the before-after analysis. There was also a technical problem with the sound system in the room, and we had move to another room.

### **BEFORE**

This group admitted they had not thought much about Muslim women. They did not subscribe to any of the stereotypical images of Muslim women perhaps because one of their classmates was Muslim. But at the same time they had not explored this area, because they had not felt the need to. I wondered whether indifference was an issue to be worried about – would indifference make it easier to believe stereotypes? Both younger groups, as compared to the older group did not have much information about Muslims but neither did they subscribe to any 'oppressed' stereotypes. They were curious about the *hijab* and realised that there was a lot of misinformation about Muslims and Muslim women, due to media obsession and misinformation.

### **AFTER**

This group viewed three stories: Roohi, Ridhwana and Humeyra. As with the earlier groups the stories often reminded individuals about questions they had about Muslims and Islam and as usual I spent time answering their questions – about prayer times, fasting in *Ramadan*, and whether they could eat in front of a Muslim who was fasting. They were curious to know more about Muslims. Based on the stories this group commented that:

- The similarity of their and Muslim women's existences – they would all like to have Roohee's professional success and happy family life
- Muslim women were not that different at all. Seemingly prosaic activities like Ridhwana eating crisps were significant for participants to decipher similarities
- Finally they felt that Muslim's were making efforts to bridge gaps as was evident in the effort each Muslim woman had put into her story and this needed to be reciprocated.

This group discussed Britishness and almost seamlessly included Ridhwana in their definition of what it meant to be British. Although, there is a gap in understandings of Muslims in general and specifically Muslim women that still needs to be filled, the questionnaire responses of 86% of participants in this group showed a positive change in their perceptions of Muslim women after watching the digital stories.



## 10.6 The Effect of Personal Narratives

When exploring the literature about DSTs, I discovered a number of references about the ability of DSTs to be self reflexive for both the teller and the listener. There was evidence of the capability of DST to initiate a process of self exploration for the story-teller but there was a definite and recognised need to explore listeners' reactions to DSTs. The eleven stories that the young Muslim women created were very different from each other and yet they stemmed from the same brief which was "to create 3-min long self-representational stories that demystified the *Muslimah*". The stories reflected the women's personalities and myriad life experiences. There were stories which were poignant, fun, thought-provoking and routine, but they all asked for the story-teller to be understood better. The women themselves recognised that the process of creating a story had given them the opportunity to think about their lives, something that they did not usually do.

As my feminist-pragmatist stance developed it reinforced my initial decision to actively encourage communities, through the digital storytelling process, to discuss their differences and develop shared community values which may then form the basis of a common culture – my postulated permeable membrane within and between different communities. In my research, dialogue enabled Muslim and non-Muslim participants to see the commonalities within their lives. For non-Muslim audiences watching Muslim women's digital stories, mundane activities like eating crisps or a partying with friends were vested with new meaning, that of similarity and commonality across difference. These young women wore headscarves and were clearly Muslim, but their actions – eating crisps, partying – made them similar. They were like friends, *they were like Bess*. There are various ways through which inter-community dialogue may be facilitated; in my research I used DST as a narrative tool to represent the lives of young Muslim women to audiences from outside their faith community. Thus I created a forum where through dialogue and discussion difference within communities could be demystified leading to inter-community understanding and cohesion. In such an approach to dialogue, the distinctiveness of and within communities is preserved (Tilbury and Mula 2009) and active co-existence between diverse groups is encouraged.

This decision to facilitate inter-community dialogue also enabled me to explore listener's reactions to Muslim women's stories. Alternative perceptions of Muslim women would only be formed if the listener engaged with the stories and reflected on the content and relevance of these stories to their lives. If they empathised with Muslim women's narratives, an alternate story could be told. In the previous pages I presented an overview of the proceedings during focus group discussions. On all three occasions individuals commented that they were aware of the "scare-mongering" perpetuated by the media. They did not accept the stereotypes but did not know what to replace them with. However as they watched the stories often they recognised and then questioned their own preconceived

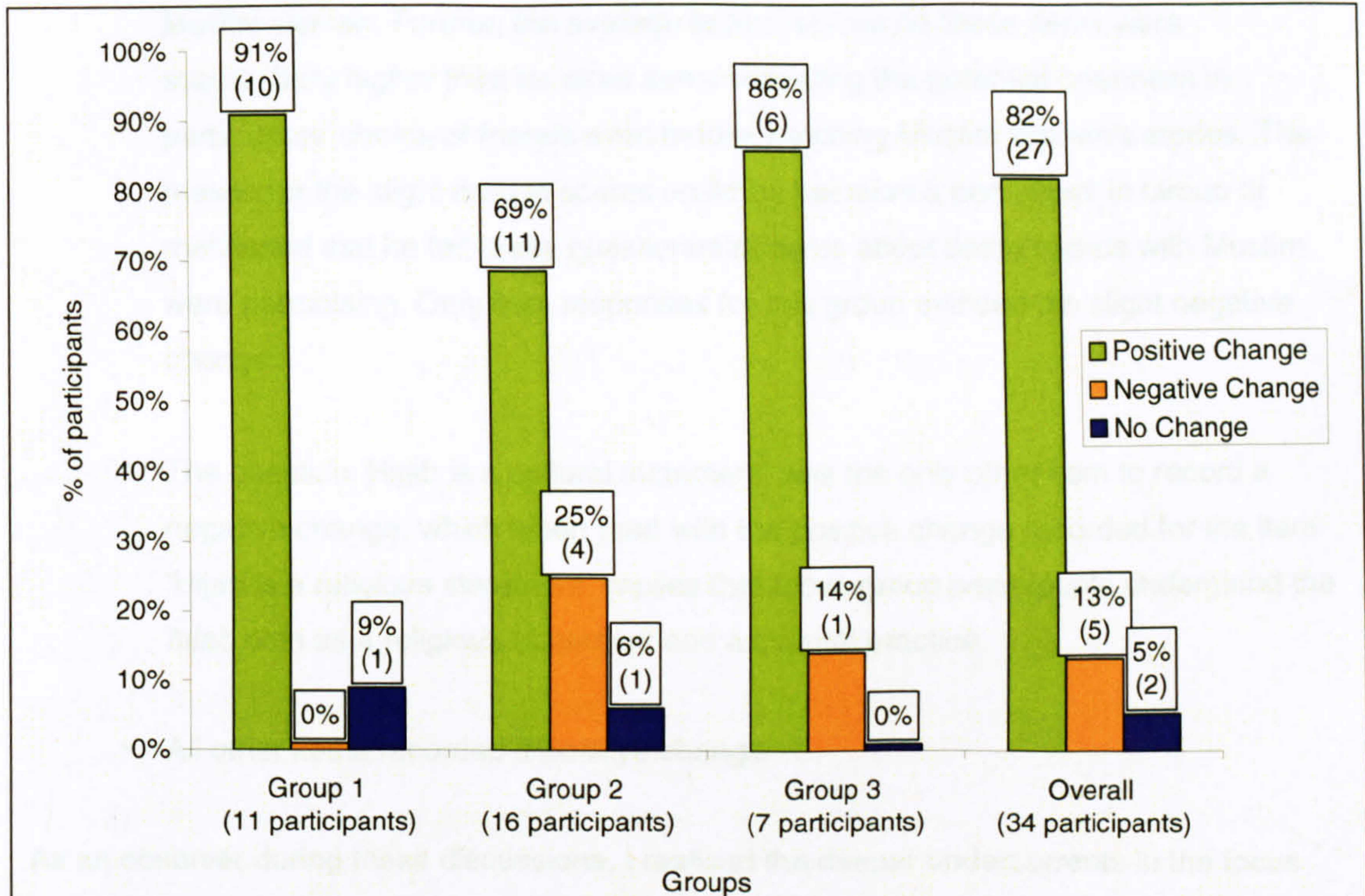


notions of Muslim women, some of which they later rejected altogether. As they watched the stories, they *heard* a different narrative about Muslim women:

- Young Muslims could balance their Islamic values and the demands of modern secular society.
- Islam was not a misogynist religion. Without always being explicitly articulated, it was clear in a number of stories that the storyteller drew strength from her belief in God and knowledge of her Islamic faith. The audience in all three groups commented on this.
- The *hijab* or head scarf was not necessarily forced upon Muslim women, here were women who had worn it out of choice and who were happy to talk about it.
- Not all Muslim men were patriarchal – the stories highlighted a number of men who on the sidelines of the protagonist's story supported her – 'a husband who dropped his wife to work every single day', 'a father who was his daughter's inspiration' and other 'supportive' men. These men were not talked of much, but they were part of the underpinnings of women's narratives and in the photographs.
- Muslim women were not necessarily oppressed; they were studying or had career aspirations. In fact in many senses Muslim women were just like women from any other cultural or religious background. Through their discussions, focus groups participants began to find shared commonalities in routine and prosaic aspects of Muslim women's DSTs – eating crisps, a multitasking mother or all-women parties. It is through this seeing of commonalities that a sense of community may be established.

Analysis of the questionnaire data lead to findings which are not be statistically significant due to small sample size (total: 34 participants), but which are nevertheless indicative of trends in data which are thought provoking and which may be validated in future research. In all 82% of participants showed a positive change in attitudes towards Muslim women after the screening of the digital stories.



**Figure 6: Change in Focus Group Participants' perceptions of Muslim women**

**Change in participants' perceptions of Muslim women:** In all three focus groups majority participants measured a positive change in their perceptions of Muslim women before and after the screenings of the digital stories. Overall 82% participants showed a positive change in their attitudes towards Muslim women after watching stories.

- In a comparison of before and after scores, the item "Muslim women are oppressed" recorded the highest cumulative positive change. 55.8% of participants scored higher on this item after the DST screenings signifying an increase in their disagreement with the statement – "Muslim women are oppressed"
- The item "Muslim faith gives you strength" recorded the next highest cumulative positive change. This is significant, because it indicates that as a result of engaging with Muslim women's stories, focus group participants saw Islam as a faith that strengthened women, rather than the stereotypical misogynist faith.
- The item 'Muslim girls can do anything that other girls can do' was also a high gainer indicating that participants were more likely to believe after watching Muslim women's stories that all women shared common life experiences which ratified the qualitative analysis.
- All three items about being friends with Muslim women, showed an infinitesimal negative change (2%) in average responses. On comparison however of individual participants' before and after scores, it was realised that this was because majority



of the scores showed no change in participants' responses to being friends with Muslim women. Further, the average before-scores on these items were substantially higher than for other items indicating the potential openness in participants' choice of friends even before watching Muslim women's stories. The reason for the slight drop in scores could be because a participant in Group III mentioned that he felt these questionnaire items about being friends with Muslim were patronising. Only item responses for this group evinced the slight negative change.

- The question 'Hijab is a cultural statement' was the only other item to record a negative change, which when read with the positive change recorded for the item 'Hijab is a religious statement' implies that focus group participants understand the *hijab* both as a religious statement and a cultural practice.
- All other items recorded a positive change

As an observer during these discussions, I realised the deeper undercurrents in the focus group discussions. Participants were interrogating concepts that they had earlier taken for granted:

- 'Britishness' - while this was not spoken about specifically except when the third group watched Ridhwana's story, it was definitely being questioned, perhaps subconsciously by various members of all three audiences. This was most obvious in groups' hesitations to classify only white communities as British. During discussions participants mentioned 'white' British groups and 'white Christian' British groups, suggesting that by default there are others who are not 'white' and not 'Christian' but who are still British. To me this signified an unspoken acceptance of the diversity within Britain. The third group's definition of 'Britishness' in non-racial and non-religious terms and using universal values, albeit a little naïve is an indication of the way forward for this debate
- All three groups commented on the importance of family values in Islam. With the first group suggesting that this was something that other communities could learn from the Muslim community.
- Even in areas where there were disagreements, common ground was sought and found, for example, as one group pointed out segregation of the sexes was something that devout Muslims practiced. They did not agree with 'forced' segregation, but then also pointed out that white / British / Christian women sometimes enjoy the company of all-female groups.



- Significantly, there was a unanimous recognition of the universality of the woman's struggle. Muslim faces and voices were telling the stories, but they could have been women from any socio-cultural, religious or racial background. The Muslim woman's story was now a familiar story and not a story characterised by difference.

### 10.7 Conclusion: DST and Possibilities for Dialogue

Through the process of creating and then screening Muslim women's digital stories to audiences from other or no faith backgrounds, I have demonstrated the power of giving voice to the 'different' can have in challenging polemical discourses about difference. By listening to Muslim women's stories and their narratives, 82% of participants evinced a positive change in their perceptions of Muslim women. Superficially, this was made possible by watching a few short digital stories and by hour-long discussions on the stories, the storytellers, and on Muslims and Islam. However there are more subtle dynamics at play.

The young Muslim women who created their stories in the first part of this research were convinced that it was important to *take* voice and that this research provided an opportunity for them to take voice and clarify their viewpoints. They took efforts to create self representational stories that were interesting, engaging and inspirational. The participants who watched the stories were committed to the process of hearing these voices. Whereas occasionally this may have been selfless commitment to the emancipation of the marginalised, in most cases this commitment was founded on a need to comprehend one's own life and enrich one's own existence through understanding of difference. Together both the storytellers and the listeners worked together to understand their social contexts and to arrive at a worldview that encompassed multiple standpoints. On the way the Muslim woman was *de-mystified* – she told her story.

In all, 34 participants from non-Muslim backgrounds watched Muslim women's digital stories. As measured by the likert-scale used, participants' attitudes towards Muslim women and Islam, before and after watching the stories, underwent a positive change which although not statistically-significant, is indicative of the way forward in discourses about dialogue and cohesion in pluralist Britain. Non-Muslim participants' enthusiasm to watch Muslim women's stories is commendable, in that it demonstrates a commitment to understanding and embracing diversity. Their reactions to the stories ratified the potential of personal voices and stories to further inter-community understanding. My research indicates that they interrogated their own pre-conceived notions of Muslim women's oppression by Islam as alleged by stereotypes and saw that many Muslim women practiced their faith or wore the *hijab* out of choice. By watching Muslim women's stories, non-Muslim participants engaged



with their lives and saw the similarities in their respective existences – as women, as students and as young people. They recognised the Muslim women storytellers as *people who were like themselves*.

This work with digital storytelling (DST) is an indicator of the possibilities of personal narratives to further dialogue and cohesion in pluralist society but also comes with a few caveats. Although digital storytelling proved a useful tool in this research, it has its limitations. A digital story is only as good as the storyteller's narrative and cannot replace the storyteller's physical presence. Further research bringing together Muslims and people of other / no faith backgrounds into contexts of active discourse will provide clearer indicators for the future of inter-community dialogue. On the positive side, DST with its use of digital resources is easily transferable and accessible on the internet.

Siddiqui (1997) describes the essence of dialogue 'as communicating one's stand in an assembly [...] in a sympathetic way to others [...] and also listening to others [...] based on mutual respect [and] to operate in areas of packed social and other spheres whereby our common values can be exercised and utilised' (p. 56 - 57). This was evident in Muslim women's stories – often their stories were not 'Muslim' stories but the stories of women who happened to be Muslim. They inherently focussed on their womanhood. The focus group participants picked up these cues of similarity to build a discourse that reflected the pluralistic nature of Britishness and the shared struggles of the sisterhood. As barriers of (in)difference were replaced by attempts to engage with the 'different other', the reasons and intentions of the individual were revealed to the community that he or she lives in. Commonality became a lens through which difference was explored and understood. Such difference that is understood ceases to be unidentifiable, and is not looked at with suspicion.



## **Section V**

**The Power of Voices: to Talk, to Share, to Be**



## SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

### The Power of Voices: to Talk, to Share, to Be

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#### I The Muslimah's dual struggle

This research began at a disconnection: between women's rights in foundational Islamic texts, their realities in Muslim communities and their perceptions in pluralist society. In the ensuing rhetoric and blinkered stereotypes, Muslim women's voices more than often remain unheard. This research contributes to reducing this disparity by empowering the believing and practising *Muslimah* to reclaim her voice and tell her own story.

Diverse voices – mothers, trainee teachers, recent migrants, citizens, pensioners, students, Muslim and non-Muslim, religious and not religious in a society that is increasingly secular – together inform the outcomes of this research. As this research explored perceptions of Muslim women in Britain, tensions around secularism and religion were inevitable. It became evident that Muslim women in the West are positioned at a visible cusp between secularism and religion. By living at this cusp, between seemingly tangential aspects of their realities and through their balances between the two, Muslim women exemplify the reconciliations that are possible. However their existence at this cusp also implies that they are doubly-marginalised and that their struggles against this marginalisation are also double sided.

Janus faced Muslim women through their choices and agency challenge two patriarchies. They challenge marginalisation in some Muslim cultures whose patriarchal interpretations of Islam are antithetical to women's rights and which also *other* women from scholarship and scholarly authority making her an outsider. Secondly they also challenge an increasingly secular Orientalist world, that often deems Islam and Muslims (both male and female) as the outsiders – as is currently manifested in the 'war against terror' between us and them (Talbot 2008). Muslim women, especially in the west, are positioned in two margins, where two mutually antagonistic ontologies – Muslim patriarchy and secular plurality – ironically doubly marginalise them as *outsiders*. By challenging both these antagonistic ontologies and by rearticulating them, Muslim women in my research positioned themselves as potential bridges between supposedly clashing civilisations – Islam and the West (Huntington 1993).



This is the duality of Muslim women's *jihad*,<sup>1</sup> their struggle, to become insiders in both discourses and thus also bridge them. My research evinces this duality of her struggle in Muslim women's understandings of the *hijab*, as a dialogical tool that gives the wearer religious authority to demand rights that have been denied and that also makes the wearer a representative of her faith who through verbal and non-verbal dialogue can facilitate inter-community understanding. For these *hijabis*, their *hijab* thus repositions them bringing them in from both positions of marginality and presents them as possible conduits between Islam and the West. Muslim women's feminisms also reflect their potential to enable antithetical discourses to engage with each other: their feminist demands are grounded in Islamic theology and they articulate these demands in both Islamic and pluralist settings. When Muslim women take voice against Muslim patriarchy, they simultaneously also challenges stereotypes of Muslim women. This was a recurring theme in my research: Muslim women constructed themselves in their discourses about Muslim culture, the media, their Muslim-woman-hood as participating insiders who *take* voice to challenge their double-marginalisation.

By dismantling barriers of (in)difference and increasing the visibility of shared commonalities between Muslims and non-Muslims, my research facilitates discourses about difference that do not *other* but which value the potential of diversity to enrich the experiences of individuals and groups. For non-Muslim participants in this research who watched Muslim women's stories, Muslim women were no longer the 'different other' who was to be feared or viewed with suspicion. She became somebody who was different but who was also similar. She was a student who has aspirations, a mother who 'multitasks', a career woman, she was part of the sisterhood of all women *and* she was Muslim. Through discussions about Muslim women, non-Muslim participants' perceptions of Islam also changed – from being perceived as a misogynist faith that limited women's choices, Islam became a faith from which Muslim women gained strength and doctrinal support in their struggles. Through dialogue, *difference was demystified* – it was understood as part of the shared existences and multiple standpoints that constitute modern pluralist Britain. Albeit on a small scale, this was inter-community dialogue in action.

## II Revisiting Discursive Threads

In the 'Introduction' to this thesis I described seven discursive threads – ontological stances, research methods and sociological concepts – that would weave in and out of the research

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<sup>1</sup> Struggle. Jihad is a word that is often misconstrued and is given violent connotations. It may mean a struggle within oneself, or a struggle for righteousness and for rights. In the context of Muslim women, I use it to imply their dual struggle for rights and recognition against double marginalisation.



process, informing it and that would also evolve as it progressed.<sup>2</sup> I undertook to revisit these threads in the 'Conclusion' to explore how they developed in relation to this research and how they in turn influenced this research. As I worked through the research process I realised that some of these threads are interlinked and that they overlap at critical junctures in this research. The development of these seven threads summarised below, indicates the contributions of this research to advancing their conceptual understanding, either as epistemologies, ontological stances or methodologies and sets the scene for future research.

### **(1) Collaborative Research, Ownership**

In an environment charged with suspicion, tension and politicisation, this research was a collaborative effort which empowered participants by positioning them as contributors in the creation of new meaning. This was not research about them; this was research for and with them. Participants shared ownership of the research. For many participants, my work was not just academic research; it was an opportunity to have Muslim women's voices heard. It was *their* struggle. They were committed to the research, transparent in their comments and trusted my research objectives. This may not have been possible in research that was undertaken from a methodological or ontological stance that did not involve participants to the extent that I did. This relationship of mutual trust, while dealing with complicated and sensitive material, is also connected to my positioning of myself in the research.

### **(2) My Auto-ethnographic Voice**

In the process of collaborative research, my own role became more nuanced – I was both researcher and researched. My status as a Muslim woman made me an insider in participants' social circles; my Islamic faith and practice made me a trusted friend. During the research process although I was part of a group, I also positioned myself as the conscientious facilitator with a degree of authority. This was most evident during the group discussion stage: I asked participants to validate my research findings, but also acted as the chair of the discussion that we were having. Constantly and unobtrusively I juggled between various roles – Muslim woman, academic researcher, believer and sceptic – in order to achieve a retelling of the Muslim woman's story through her own voice.

### **(3) Participants' Voices**

Participants' voices formed a constant thread in this research. My collaborative research model insisted on participants' centrality to the research process and enabled Muslim women's voices to create and validate research findings through semi-structured interviews and subsequent themed group discussions. To facilitate adequate representation of their

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<sup>2</sup> these are different from my NVivo7 findings which underpin in the *Voices* section



opinions, my research design and thesis structure focussed on creating a space for Muslim women's voice in academic discourse. This led to the *Voices* section, which directly represents participants' narratives and opinions. Their ideas and words were used to formulate and present the arguments that constitute the *Voices* chapters. In this section the heterogeneity among Muslim women, and the diversities and commonalities within the universal sisterhood of *all* women were emphasised. In creating their digital stories Muslim participants' took voice and created stories that challenged media stereotypes. When these stories were screened, *Muslimahs'* voices were heard by audiences from other faith / no faith backgrounds. There was an evinced 82% positive change in audiences' attitudes towards Muslim women which indicates the potential of Muslim women's voices to facilitate inter-community dialogue in pluralist Britain.

#### **(4) Inter-disciplinary Research**

Inter-disciplinarity is a debatable stance to take in a research project. However in order to fully represent the diversity of Muslim women's existence, my feminist-pragmatist stance justified an interdisciplinary approach which related knowledge to its consequences for individuals. Taking an interdisciplinary approach in my exploration of British Muslim women's lives has implied that this research does not focus on specific subject matters. It is not about Islamic feminism only, neither does it exclusively entail textual analysis of Islamic scripture relevant to Muslim women, nor does it look only at media representation. Rather it explores Muslim women's diverse lived experiences as narrated by Muslim women and which cannot be limited to any one or two academic disciplines.

#### **(5) Feminist Discourse**

As a methodological stance, feminist methods allowed me to position this research as a collaborative effort, empowering research participants to own this research and experience it as their own struggle. As a philosophical worldview, tensions were evident in Muslim women's narratives about feminism. They constantly made feminist arguments without using feminist vocabulary and criticised Islamic feminism as a contradiction. My research asserts that although Muslim women may not call their struggle Islamic feminism, they are engaged in a two pronged struggle against double-marginalisation by Muslim and secular patriarchies. Through explorations of the construct 'Muslim woman' my research strengthens feminist arguments about the universality of the sisterhood, but also stresses that there is diversity within it that needs to be contextualised in feminist discourse. Finally Muslim women's feminisms included co-operation with men, who became their supporters in their struggles for rights.



## **(6) Collective Memory Work**

My usage of collective memory work was informed by both Halbwachs' theorisation of collective memory as a philosophy to understand the influence of the collective on the individual (1941) and by Haug's use of collective memory work to explore female sexuality as a social construct (Haug *et al* 1999), but it was different from both approaches. In this research, collective memory work was a conceptual framework which together with reflective narratives and collaborative research models informed and brought coherence to my methodological choices. I used four separate methods: semi-structured interviews, themed group discussions, digital storytelling and focus group screenings of Muslim women's digital stories to challenge stereotypes of Muslim women that were rooted in the histories and therefore in Muslim and non-Muslim communities collective memories (Kahf 1999). Together Muslim and non-Muslim participants in this research gently shook remembered history. Rather than being the different other the Muslim women was now different and similar – "She is just like our friend Bess"<sup>3</sup>.

## **(7) Authenticity and Authority**

This remains a contested and complicated area that was manifested in different ways in this research. Firstly religious authority – I have demonstrated the different ways in which Muslim understand authenticity of texts. As Esposito writes, 'there is not one but many Islams', though he also asserts that some Muslims could take offence to this statement and that they would argue that, 'there is only Islam and many Muslims' (Esposito 1998: 223). Whatever the standpoint one takes, the multiple interpretations that are possible of any faith including Islam imply that this will continue to be a debated area. For Muslim women this becomes particularly contentious because their struggles are grounded in Islamic theology. In order to find their space, Muslim women are reinterpreting Islamic doctrines about gender which can be problematic either because their interpretations are not accepted as 'authentic' or because their interpretations are not considered authentic. For example Laleh Bakhtiar's translation of the Quran (2007) has been 'recognised' by the Islamic Society of North America. On the other hand, Amina Wadud-Muhsin's leading of mixed congregation prayers, was overwhelmingly rejected by all Muslim participants in my research as being against Islamic teachings.

This leads on the question, whose voice is authoritative? My feminist-pragmatist standpoint encouraged the vesting of authority in the individual who experiences and enacts knowledge. In my research this led to an articulation of believing and practising Muslim women's 'authentic' narratives that they themselves chose to tell – as women who experience their

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<sup>3</sup> Comment made by a participant in Focus Group 1 – 1<sup>st</sup> October 2009. The name 'Bess' has been changed to ensure anonymity



femininity in a still patriarchal world and as Muslims who *live* their *Din*<sup>4</sup> in an increasingly secular world. My research thus addresses and strengthens Katherine Bullock's standpoint to bring respectability to the voice of the believer in academic discourse (2003).

### III An Ongoing Journey

This research clarifies the nuances of some young Muslim women's lives in Britain and also signifies an onward and ongoing journey: not all Muslim women are oppressed, they often draw upon their faith for strength and guidance, and many use their agency and knowledge of Islam to challenge patriarchy prevalent in some Muslim communities. By ignoring the efforts of such Muslim women and by denying the validity of their religious standpoints, sections of pluralist secular society also marginalise Muslim women. My research gave young Muslim women in Britain an opportunity to challenge this double-marginalisation. Through an iterative and dialogic process of the Muslim woman being given voice, taking voice and this voice being heard, she is *de-mystified*. Through her taking of voice through digital storytelling, stereotypical media imagery of Muslim women was challenged and was replaced by stories that Muslim women themselves articulated. Dialogue that followed the screening of Muslim women's stories enabled discussions about shared commonalities and in the context of Britain, shared Britishness.

After the screenings of Muslim women's stories, as measured by the likert-scale used 82 % of non-Muslim listeners felt more positively towards Muslim women and Islam. Non Muslim participants identified and discussed values that they felt were common to both Muslims and non-Muslims, indicating the possibility of building bridges of commonality between diverse British communities. All three audiences before watching Muslim women's stories commented about being aware of "scare-mongering" about Muslims and Islam being put forward in the media but also said that they were unsure of what to replace media stereotypes with. This tallied with what Muslim women said about Muslims not doing enough to challenge stereotypes. The creating and screening of Muslim women's digital stories in my research signified a way forward to end this impasse between media metaphors of Muslim women (and Islam), Muslims and pluralist society. Muslim women's stories filled a gap that they themselves and non-Muslim participants identified – for the participants who watched them, the stories challenged and more than often replaced media imagery of Muslim women.

It has been a fruitful journey, and now more needs to be done, building upon the precedent and findings of this work. Muslim women who participated in my research when they took voice, challenged patriarchy and also challenged stereotypes about Islam, Muslims and

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<sup>4</sup> Way of life. Islam.



themselves. By dismantling these stereotypes they enhanced the potential of inter-community understanding to further dialogue and cohesion. Through further work, that uses a similar collaborative approach, the involvement of Muslim women in academic and non-academic discourses about diversity, plurality and integration may be encouraged. It may thus be possible for synergies between supposedly conflicting dichotomies – Islam and the West (Huntington 1993), secularism and religion, religious identity and social plurality – to be developed and enhanced.

In this research, personal encounters were simulated using digital storytelling, which established the tremendous potential of personal narratives as a method to further inter-community dialogue. Muslim women's digital stories challenged media rhetoric dominated by tensions surrounding immigration and terrorism. As the topicality of such polemical rhetoric increases, so does the urgency to facilitate dialogue with and about diversity in Britain. My research with digital storytelling makes it possible to take this work to the next level, and bring together groups and individuals from diverse socio-cultural-economic backgrounds, encouraging them to talk and to share their experiences and their *differences*. This is one way to increase cohesion in a tense and suspicious society.

My research also clarified aspects of Muslim women's disagreements with feminism and some definitions of emancipation. It also highlighted the synergies that are possible between Islamic practice and feminism. In a universal sisterhood that characterised by diversity, such synergies will clarify the porosity of internal divisions, so that commonalities within the sisterhood are more visible. This will enable *all* women to work together to challenge persistent gender inequalities in *all* societies and to find their truths. This is feminist scholarship that clarifies differences and enhances similarities, strengthening bonds among women from all backgrounds. Such scholarship according to bell hooks, is informed by 'a place for solidarity [...] where we [women] can speak the truth that heals, that transforms – that makes feminist revolution' (1989:133).

The authority and authenticity of religious interpretation remains a contested area. However, through articulations of their faith and their demands for rights, participants in this research demonstrated Muslim women's negotiations and balances to challenge patriarchy without compromising their faith. Other Muslim women are still being denied the rights assured to them in Quran and the *Sunnah* – a denial that often takes place under the guise of religious authority. As evinced in my research Muslim women recognise a discrepancy in their experiences of truth: between truth as revealed by God in foundational religious texts and truth as implemented by patriarchy in some Muslim cultures. To garner rights for deprived Muslim women it is necessary to challenge these patriarchal interpretations, which requires scholarship, religious empathy, cultural sensitivity and action-oriented research.



One such area that requires further exploration is Muslim women's gradual marginalisation from the processes of knowledge production, although Muslim women in early Islamic history were authoritative scholars. This is partly a symptom of Le Doeuff's description of the universal marginalisation of all women from the processes of knowledge production (1998). For Muslim women however this is further compounded by what Pickthall calls the cultural side of Islam (1926). I also agree with Aisha Bewley, that this may be an effect of and reaction to histories of colonialism (1999) which in modern Britain are further complicated by debates of migration and identity politics.

Throughout my ethnographic work, Muslim women referred to authoritative Muslim women of the past as role models whom they tried to emulate, they also mentioned a lack of contemporary Muslim women personalities who may be considered to be role models. In their discussions they perceived a gap in media portrayals of Muslim women – there was nobody like them. In my discussion with non-Muslim participants, this gap was again mentioned – there were few Muslim women in positions of authority whom younger people could emulate. These are two inter-linked areas that can be further explored by building upon my work with Muslim women. There is also until now unexplored potential of digital storytelling to be used within Muslim communities to create awareness of Muslim women's social roles and contributions and maybe also create role models with whom other Muslim women can empathise. Other related areas that may be explored include contextualising Muslim women's opinions in policy formulation; and facilitating on-going education for women (and men) about women's rights in Islam from theological and feminist perspectives.

To end, I go back to my initial objective to reinstate the *Muslimah* as a storyteller who tells her own story. Through sensitive and ethical methodological choices, I have achieved this for the Muslim women who participated in this research and also for other women whose stories resonate with the stories my participants told. These were stories of love, sadness, aspirations and challenges – simple stories that presented a powerful message of commonality irrespective of and in spite of difference. The dialogue that these stories facilitated led to new meanings of community in which truths were not always agreed upon, but were still shared. This research mediates an optimistic belief that the personal voices of Muslim women and others can facilitate discourses of difference that are not polemical towards the different other and which recognise the enriching possibilities of diversity. This is the power of voices: to talk about difference, to share commonalities and to exist in the world we share.



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## Appendix A: Invitation Letter

Sariya Contractor  
 Address Line 1  
 Address Line 2  
 Cheltenham  
 Date:

Dear *Participant*

I am currently undertaking doctoral research leading to an MPhil/PhD at the University of Gloucestershire with the Faculty of Education, Humanities and Sciences under the supervision of Dr. Alison Scott-Baumann and Dr. Malcolm Maclean. My research is entitled "Demystifying the *Muslimah*: Exploring Different Perceptions of Young Muslim Women in Britain". I will through my research give voice to the opinions of young Muslim women, like you, on subjects like the *Shari'ah*; cultural influences within society; freedom of expression; media portrayals of Islam & Muslims; inter-community dialogue and Islamic Feminism.

In my work I challenge incorrect media portrayals of Muslim women as suppressed or having lesser rights than men within Muslim societies and argue instead that Muslim women have their own definition of emancipation and seek to balance their religious and societal roles. They hence pursue their education and careers while maintaining Islamic values like the *hijab* and modesty. Many misconceptions about Islam stem from incorrect information about the rights it accords to its women. By clarifying the role and lives of Muslim women through their own voice I hope to also make a contribution to inter-community dialogue and understanding.

This letter is an invitation to participate in my research by sharing your opinions and views on these and other subjects that you may consider relevant to your identity as a *Muslimah* and to also make a contribution to inter-community dialogue. Participation is fully voluntary, you can also choose to openly participate or remain anonymous throughout the research. Participation will involve 2-3 interviews/discussions that will be recorded electronically. I will also be using Digital Storytelling (DST) at a later stage of the research process. You have the option to participate or opt out of the DST stage of the research.

If you have further questions or clarifications about the research process please feel free to contact me by e-mail ([xxx@glos.ac.uk](mailto:xxx@glos.ac.uk)) or on XXXXXX XXXXX.

I will remain committed to ethical considerations throughout my research including confidentiality and anonymity. You will have access to ongoing research work and can chose to withdraw your participation at any stage of the research.

I hope that my research will give Muslim women an authentic voice of matters relevant to their lives; clarify perceptions of *Muslimahs*; and also make a contribution to inter-community dialogue and understanding.

I look forward to speaking to you and thank you for your cooperation.

Yours Sincerely

Sariya Contractor



## Appendix B: Consent Form 1

(This consent form was for young Muslim women choosing to participate in Stage 1 and 2 of this research.)

Date: / /200

I have read the information presented in the information / invitation letter about the study being conducted by Sariya Contractor of the Faculty of Education, Humanities and Sciences at the University of Gloucestershire on the subject "**Demystifying the *Muslimah*: Exploring Different Perceptions of Young Muslim Women in Britain**". I have been briefed about the research and have had the opportunity to ask seek clarifications; ask questions related to this study and have received satisfactory answers.

I am aware that my interviews/ discussions will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy.

I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the thesis and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that I have the option to remain anonymous.

I am also aware that Digital Story Telling (DST) will be used as a part of the research process and that I have the option to opt out of creating a digital story.

I am also aware that I have the option to withdraw my participation from the research at any time by notifying the researcher in writing.

With full knowledge of the above, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

Yes  No

I agree to have my interview audio recorded.

Yes  No

I choose to openly participate in the research

Yes  No

I choose to remain anonymous

Yes  No

I am interested in participating in the Digital Storytelling process

Yes  No

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_/\_\_/\_\_\_\_



## Appendix C: Consent Form 2

(This consent form was for young Muslim women volunteering to create DST in Stage 3 of this research.)

I have read the information presented in the information / invitation letter about the study being conducted by Sariya Contractor of the Faculty of Education, Humanities and Sciences at the University of Gloucestershire on the subject "**Demystifying the *Muslimah*: Exploring Different Perceptions of Young Muslim Women in Britain**". I have been briefed about the research and have had the opportunity to seek clarifications; ask questions related to this study and have received satisfactory answers.

I am also aware that Digital Story Telling (DST) will be used as a part of the research. I have chosen to participate in the DST process and understand the requirements of this process. I have been briefed about the content of a digital story and have been shown a sample digital story and am aware that I will select and determine the content of the digital story that I provide. I also am aware that it will be screened in public forums including focus groups, and may in the future be part of a website on Muslim women (participants will be asked for special and separate consent prior to stories being included on a website).

I understand that I have the option to remain anonymous in which case the DST process and resulting story will be suitably altered to ensure anonymity of the story-teller. I am also aware that I have the option to withdraw my participation from the research at any time by notifying the researcher in writing.

1. With full knowledge of the above, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in the DST stage of this research.

Yes  No

2. I have participated in earlier stages of the research – interview and group discussion.

Yes  No

3. I choose to remain anonymous

Yes  No

4. I consent to the recording of my voice for the DST

Yes  No

5. I consent to the recording of my likeness for the DST

Yes  No

6. I grant Sariya Contractor the right to publish, broadcast or disseminate in any form or medium during the course of this research project, the stories that are created out of this process, including the recorded narration and pictures.

Yes  No

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant e-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_



### Appendix D: Consent Form 3

(This consent form was for participants from other faith backgrounds who participated in Stage 4 of this research.)

I understand that this focus group discussion is part of the research project being conducted by Sariya Contractor of the Faculty of Education, Humanities and Sciences at the University of Gloucestershire on the subject "**Demystifying the *Muslimah*: Exploring Different Perceptions of Young Muslim Women in Britain**". I have been briefed about the research and have had the opportunity to seek clarifications; ask questions related to this study and have received satisfactory answers.

I understand that the discussion will be recorded for the purposes of analysis. I understand that I have the option to remain anonymous. I am also aware that I have the option to withdraw my participation from the research at any time by notifying the researcher in writing

1. With full knowledge of the above, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in the DST stage of this research.

Yes  No

2. I choose to remain anonymous

Yes  No

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant e-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_



## Appendix E: Ethics Statement Presented to Research Ethics Subcommittee (RESC)

### Risk Assessment

During the course of this research I will be working very closely with young Muslim women in an attempt to demystify their lives – aims, aspirations and challenges - to larger society. I will through my research give voice to the opinions of my research participants on sensitive and sometimes controversial subjects like the *Shari'ah*; cultural influences within society; freedom of expression; media portrayals of Islam & Muslims; inter-community dialogue and Islamic Feminism. Through a series of two to three interviews/discussions with my participants I shall try to establish a collective understanding of how young Muslim women living in Britain perceive themselves and their opinion on matters relevant to their lives.

Participants will be contacted using gatekeeper access at three Islamic institutes of higher education with whom my supervisor Dr. Alison Scott-Baumann, through her on-going work has an established relationship of trust. Participants will also be contacted through Student Islamic Societies at universities where I have personal contacts. The research envisages interviewing 10 participants at each the following institutions:

- Al-Mahdi Institute (Birmingham)
- Ebrahim Community College (London)
- Markfield Institute of Higher Education (Leicester)
- Coventry University
- The University of Gloucestershire
- Loughborough University
- University of Warwickshire

The women I work with will be mature adults however the subject of the research and the nature of intended discussions with the participants impart a degree of **vulnerability** to the participants and to me as the researcher. Discussions, for example, would include sharing opinions on subjects like *Shari'ah* and Islamic Feminism which to the lay-observer may seem incompatible, leading to misunderstanding the researcher's objectives. Discussions about cultural influence in Muslim society and women's roles could be deemed as an intrusion into the established societal norms.

To avoid these risks interviews will always be held in safe institutional settings - the universities or Islamic institutes where the women work or study. The academic environment will serve to increase the comfort levels of the participants, enabling them to freely share opinions and also will lessen vulnerability of both the participants and the researcher.



All participants will be briefed about the academic and practical objectives of this research and will be provided access to on-going work. Throughout the research, care will be taken to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality, of vulnerable participants. The anonymity of participants choosing to remain so will also be maintained.

This research intends to give an authentic voice to young Muslim women by using their own words to articulate their thoughts and feelings. I therefore anticipate the willingness of certain participants to make an open contribution to the research. All participants will be given an unbiased and accurate representation within the research after obtaining fully-informed and voluntary written consent. All participants including those contacted using gatekeeper access will be given the option to withdraw from the research at any time.

The research will attempt to initiate a forum for emancipatory discourse on the sensitive yet crucial subject of women's rights in Islam from the point of view of the women themselves. This research also aims to make a contribution to inter-community dialogue and understanding by initiating a forum where the lives and value-system of Muslim women can be discussed and demystified.

### **Conflict of Research interests**

This research works under the premise that Islam gives rights to women that for various reasons may or may not be accessible to Muslim women in practice. Islam, therefore, is inherently emancipatory but situational conditions like ethnic culture, societal norms, poverty, war etc have led to the backwardness of women in certain Muslim societies. However the Orientalist approaches to research on Islam from the outside; and negative media stereotypes of Muslims have served to strengthen a view that Islam is a misogynist religion.

As I researcher I may encounter young Muslim women (research participants)

- who do not agree with my standpoint;
- who may differ in their views on Islam and the rights it accords to women;
- who feel the media stereotypes are justifiable; **and / or**
- who perhaps feel oppressed by certain aspects of their religion.

The views and opinions of such participants, however different from my own initial assumptions, will also be contextualised into the research and will be given a fair representation within the thesis.

### **Digital Storytelling**

This research will use digital storytelling (DST) an ethnographic tool and as a medium to initiate dialogue between Muslim and Non- Muslim research participants. Care will be taken to ensure that the young Muslim women participants are fully aware about various aspects of this research stage including:

- The process & purpose of creating a digital story.
- Future screening to an audience.
- *hijab* considerations

The digital stories will be shared with an audience that may have male members. This can be of concern for participants who practice *hijab*. The word *hijab* commonly refers to the head and body covering that Muslim women use, but also includes standards of modesty, privacy, and morality practised by both Muslim men and women. Participants will be carefully briefed about various Hijab considerations that arise from creating and screening digital stories. This will ensure that participants only share photos and experiences that they deem appropriate with their Hijab and are comfortable sharing with a mixed audience of males and females. Stories shall be created only after obtaining voluntary and informed written consent from the participants specifically for creating a digital story.

Some practitioners have commented that DST can encourage participants to disclose personal or private information; care will be taken to ensure that participants are repeatedly made aware that the digital stories and information contained in them will be shared in a public forum. Participants will also be given the option to withdraw their digital stories from the research at any time. The confidentiality of private disclosures, if any, will be maintained throughout the research.

### **Data Protection, Anonymity, Storage and Disposal of Data**

Information in hard copy including consent forms will be filed and stored in secure lockers. Interview transcripts will be stored electronically in secure folders protected from unauthorised access. All data (electronic and paper) will be disposed using appropriate means once their purpose has been exhausted.

The nature of my research will involve using quotes to highlight the opinions of participants within the thesis, where necessary quotes will be anonymised to protect the participant. In other cases where a participant has chosen to openly participate in the research she will be given an accurate and fair representation.



The interviews / discussions will be unstructured and will encourage the participants to share their opinions on various matters relevant to their lives and to this study. The research is at an early stage. I need to develop a detailed interview agenda and interview schedules which I would hope to review with the committee at a later date.

## Appendix F: Sample Interview Brief

(Interview brief that I gave Nur Faezah - a participant from Warwick University)

The interview techniques that I use are very simple. It's a narrative interview I am not going to say much. You've got to do all the talking. I will make a few intelligent comments and help guide the conversation if necessary. Otherwise I am going to be silent. What you have to do is – there are the different things that are relevant to Muslim women today and that Muslim women aren't getting a chance to air their voices on. Things like women's rights in Islam; women's position in Muslim society; women's role in Muslim society; women's role in multicultural society; Islamic feminism; media stereotypes; and one last thing could be inter-community dialogue and the role that Muslim women play. And there are so many other things. You can pick up some of these, pick up anything else you want to talk about; start from where you want to and it would be very nice if you can share personal experiences or stories of incidents that have occurred to you or to people you know. Make it as informal as you want to and forget that this (the recorder) thing exists.



## Appendix G: NVivo7 Screenshots

Through a process of manual pen-paper coding and coding in NVivo7, I coded all 42 interviews that I transcribed (two women opted out and I lost one interview due a technical failure). Coding was a manual process because participants' referred to different themes in different contexts and also using different words. Coding a theme in NVivo7 was used to create 'free nodes' which tell the user how many participants or 'sources' have referred to a theme and how many times it has been referred to or 'references'. Screen shot. 1 shows free nodes and the trial and error involved in selecting nodes that were relevant to participants' narratives. The red arrows on the left indicate nodes that were not significant. The green arrows on the right indicate significant nodes. The purple arrow bottom right indicates that 'Islamic Feminism' is a significant node but also highlights a limitation of the 'text query' function that may be used to automatically code data. NVivo7 may have successfully identified instances in participants' narratives where they spoke about Islamic feminism. But it also counted the phrase every time it appeared even if it was in the same sentence. This resulted in 211 'references' for Islamic feminism in 32 'sources'. Manual coding would have counted the same number of 'sources' but fewer 'references'.

**Screen Shot 1: Sample Free Nodes**

Free Nodes			
Name	Sources	References	
Fatima (r.a)	16	20	←
Focus on Oppressed Unrepresentative Muslim women	11	13	
Freedom	16	35	←
Good Media	2	2	
Government's role in Dialogue	2	2	
Hijab - Dialogic Tool	11	18	
Hijab - Faith Reasons	21	24	←
Hijab and Choice	4	4	
Hijab and Comfort	4	14	
Hijab and Freedom	6	6	
Hijab and Identity	14	21	
Hijab and Male-gaze	11	14	
Hijab and Moderation	3	3	
Hijab and Modesty	14	27	←
Hijab and Pride	4	11	
Hijab and Protection	12	55	←
Hijab and Respect	10	11	
In the media	3	5	
Inequalities	3	3	
Intercommunity dialogue	7	7	
Iran - giving women rights	1	1	
Islam as misunderstood	12	16	
Islamic Feminism	32	211	←
Khadija (r.a)	19	23	←
Maryam (a.s)	4	4	



Through repeatedly exploring various themes in interviews, I set up a parent-child structure of tree-nodes and free-nodes. This hierarchical structure helped identify patterns in participants' narratives. Again through trial and error I tried different tree node-free node schemas before arriving at a structure that could reasonably map the themes in the data. Some tree nodes were easier to group together, for example, all references to the *hijab* were grouped under a 'Hijab' tree node. Others were more complicated, for example, arguments being made in the 'Hijab' tree node were also relevant to the feminism tree node. Screen shot 2 illustrates the final seven tree nodes that encapsulated the various themes from participants and which informed stage 2 group discussions

**Screen Shot 2: Tree Nodes**

Tree Nodes			
	Name	Sources	References
+	Being a Woman	0	0
+	British Islam	0	0
+	Dialogue	0	0
+	Feminism	0	0
+	Hijab	0	0
+	Islam versus Culture deb	0	0
+	Media perceptions	0	0
+	Need for Change	0	0

**Screen Shot 3: Tree Node – 'Hijab'**

Tree Nodes			
	Name	Sources	References
-	Hijab	0	0
	Hijab - Dialogic Tool	11	18
	Hijab - Faith Reasons	21	24
	Hijab and Choice	4	4
	Hijab and Comfort	4	14
	Hijab and Freedom	6	6
	Hijab and Identity	14	21
	Hijab and Male-gaze	11	14
	Hijab and Moderation	3	3
	Hijab and Modesty	14	27
	Hijab and Pride	4	11
	Hijab and Protection	12	55
	Hijab and Respect	10	11
	not wearing Hijab	3	4
	Started wearing hijab because friends or family wore it	4	4
	Started wearing it young (puberty) (parental influence)	5	5



Each tree node was the result of grouping together a number of earlier free nodes. The 'sources' and 'reference' for each of these tree nodes shows up as '0' because I did not code data at tree nodes, rather I coded data at the nodes that were embedded within tree nodes. So for example the 'Hijab' tree node contained the following nodes as illustrated in screen shot. 3.

In some cases tree node-free node relationships were more complex which resulted in further hierarchies within each tree node, as illustrated in screen shot 4. Participants' agreements with feminism were often implicit and unintentional. I coded these as 'Agreements with feminism' but under a separate heading 'Unintentional but inherent feminism'. Also comments made under the 'Objectification of women' node were linked to comments made by participants that I have coded under the 'Hijab and male-gaze' node in the previous 'Hijab' tree node.

**Screen Shot 4: Tree Node – Feminism**

Tree Nodes			
	Name	Sources	References
+	Being a Woman	0	0
+	British Islam	0	0
+	Dialogue	0	0
-	Feminism	0	0
	Name	Sources	References
-	Agreements with feminism	8	10
	Name	Sources	References
	Unintentional but inherent Feminist	13	23
	Name	Sources	References
	Disagreements with Feminism	18	21
	Equity versus Equality	24	48
	Freedom	16	35
	Islamic Feminism	32	211
	Objectification of women	7	11
	Name	Sources	References
+	Hijab	0	0
+	Islam versus Culture deb	0	0
+	Media perceptions	0	0
+	Need for Change	0	0

Finally, not only did NVivo7 give me access to nodes and tree nodes or themes and patterns in participants' narratives. It also gave me continuous access to their actual words. This ensured that their voices were central to my discussions. This was also useful during the thesis writing stage when I quoted participants in the text. Screen Shot. 5 explores the



'Media Stereotypes' node in the 'Media perceptions' Tree node. Selecting this node enabled me to see all the comments that participants made about media stereotypes. The first comment that NVivo7 highlighted was made by Huda.<sup>1</sup> Here again the difficulty of using automatic coding in NVivo7 is highlighted. In addition to manual coding for the 'media stereotypes' node, I also tried to use a 'text query' that codes all relevant text that match a word or phrase. I also used Boolean filters (AND, OR) and other filters (relevant, near) in this process. Again, NVivo7 may have successfully identified instances in participants' narratives where they spoke about media stereotypes. But it also counted each word every time it appeared even if they were in the same sentence. This resulted in 234 'references' for media stereotypes in 41 'sources', which if read on its own could give undue prominence to this finding.

### Screen Shot 5: Media Stereotypes Node and participant's comment

**Tree Nodes**

Name	Sources	References
Hijab	0	0
Islam versus Culture deb	0	0
Media perceptions	0	0
<b>Media Stereotypes</b>		
Case Study - Archbis	8	9
Case Study - Niqabi	3	3
Case Study - Shaking	3	3
Case Study - Turkey	1	1
Focus on Oppressed	11	13
Good Media	2	2
Islam as misundersto	12	16
<b>Media Stereotypes</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>234</b>
Muslims not doing en	13	17

**Media Stereotypes**

<Documents\Interview Transcripts - AlMahdi\Huda (A)> - § 1 reference coded [2.16% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 2.16% Coverage

Umm the headlines all I can see is either oppression or..... oppression ... or a bit more of it. They seem to find the worst in the terms of...the worst of situations for any woman to be in but find the Muslim women. Then they kinda forget that their own women – non-Muslim women are in the same situation. But they are using it as a leverage I think to put Islam down. Women are a tool, we've always been a tool. And they are a tool again just to give Islam a bad point of view in front of everybody else.

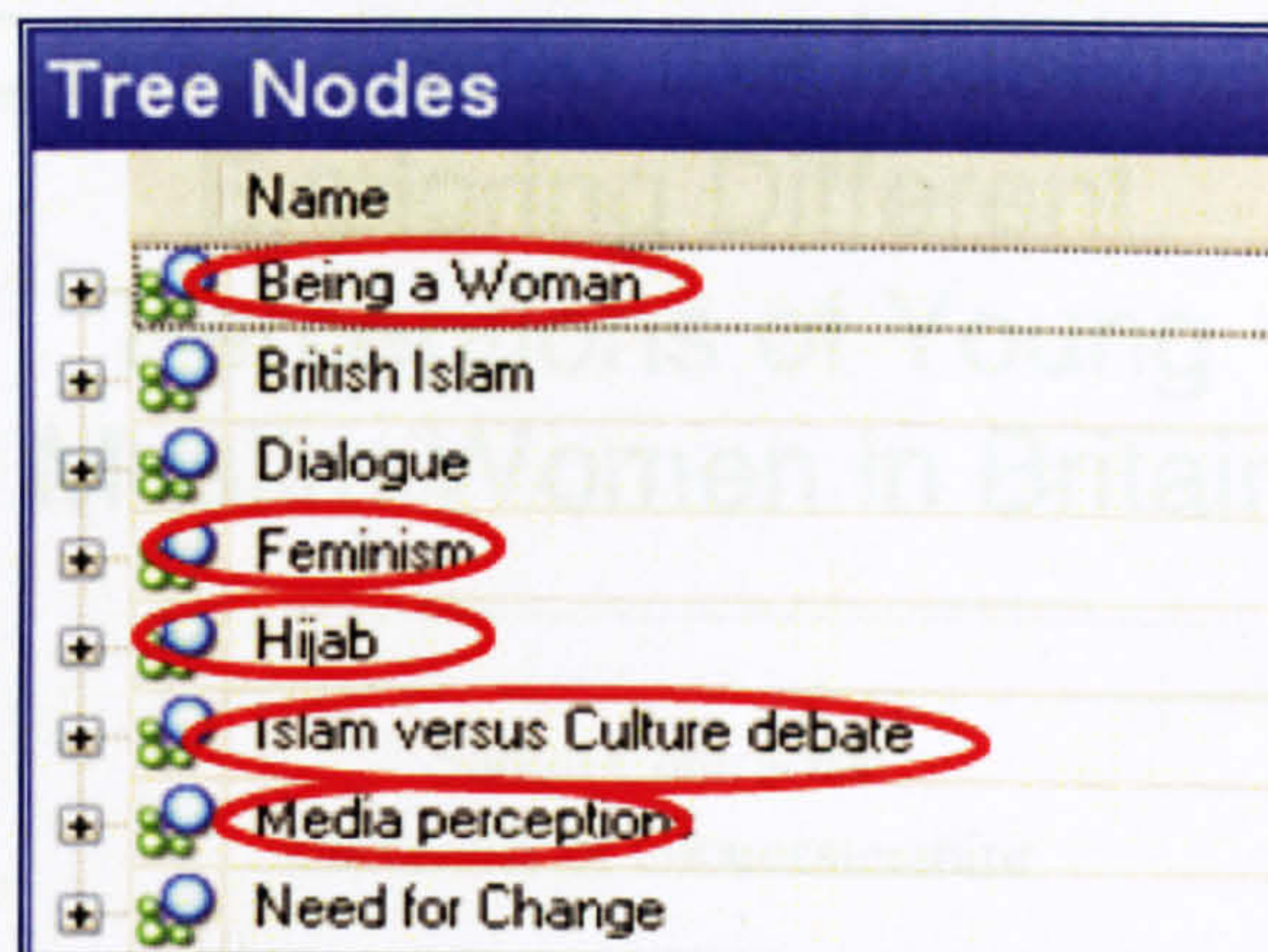
In this research NVivo7 was a useful tool to gather and structure data from interviews. This structuring process enabled patterns to be identified. Automatic coding or coding around particular words or themes was not useful due to the overlaps and diversity within the data. For stage two of the research, NVivo7 research findings were discussed with participants

<sup>1</sup> Name changed because participants wanted to remain anonymous



during themed group discussions. This gave participants an opportunity to critique and validate these findings which formed the basis of the *Voices* section, either as separate chapters or as threads that were explored across all five *Voices* chapters. In screen shot 6, the themes circled in red informed individual *Voices* chapters and the other three formed discursive threads that are explored in all 5 chapters.

**Screen Shot 6: Tree nodes and Voices chapters**





**Appendix H: Powerpoint Presentation used for Stage II Group Discussions**

**Slide 1**

**Demystifying the Muslimah:  
Exploring Different  
Perceptions of Young  
Muslim Women in Britain**

---

Sariya Contractor  
University of Gloucestershire

**Slide 2**

**Research Process**

**Stage I**

- Interviews with 45 young Muslim women in 7 institutions
- Different ethnic and cultural backgrounds
- Young Muslim women training to be Alimahs
- Young women training for various professional careers including law, medicine, education, sports training, business, psychology and sciences
- Young professionals
- Full-time Mums
- British citizens as well as recent migrants.
- Students in the UK for their studies



## Slide 3

## Analysis Process

- Fully Transcribed interviews
- Member checking
- Manual analysis to find themes
- NVIVO for more in-depth analysis
- NVIVO for structure

### Stage II

- Group discussion – What do you think of my findings?

## Slide 4

## Findings I

Participants describe themselves as British Muslims. They mention layered identities which retain certain cultural values and traditions from 'back home' - their countries of origin, while they also often adapt to 'fit' into British society.

This 'British Muslim' culture seems to be characterised by a tolerance and a desire to balance 'Muslimness' with 'Britishness' and which places a lesser focus on sectarian differences within the Muslim community



## Slide 5

## Findings II

There seems to be a occasional tensions between real life pressures and ideals that Muslim women aspire to.

Diversity within a universal sisterhood of all women

Informal observations however show the ability of the women, to make compromises based on their individual life situations

Some women subscribe to patriarchal understandings of the role of women that limit her role in society, but nevertheless continue to have jobs and careers

## Slide 6

## Findings III

The need for education within the community and a need to depart from understandings of Islam that are cultural to those that are Islamic



## Slide 7

## Findings IV

The Hijab seems to have multiple meanings and importance

- Modesty
- Identity
- Spirituality
- Freedom
- many women describe it as an opportunity to initiate dialogue

Why as a group do you think the Hijab is important to Muslim women?

## Slide 8

## Findings V

Muslim women may not want to be noticeable public figures

OR

they are not given the opportunities either due to patriarchal Muslim societies

OR

the media is not interested in 'Hijabbed' Muslim women

What do you think is the case?



## Slide 9

## Findings VI

The media does not do justice to Muslim women in its representations. But Muslim communities are not doing enough to clarify our faith and faith-based practices.

What types of images would you like to see in the media?

Also what actions could you and the Muslim community take to enhance engagement with the media ?

## Slide 10

## Findings VII

You had three different opinions on Islamic feminism:

It is unnecessary because Islam is inherently emancipatory

It is disrespectful to Islamic values and it needs to be redefined

Others are happy with it as long as it works within the limits of Islam

Most women seem agree that Muslim women need to demand their rights but don't think Islamic Feminism is the way to do it.

Can we have another name for this struggle?



## Slide 11

## Way forward

- Need for Change
- More analysis
- Digital Storytelling
- 3 minute long mini-movie
- See my DST.
- What do you think we need to talk about in our stories?
- Would you like to create a digital story?



## Appendix I: Digital Storytelling Guidelines

The digital stories are an integral part of stage 3 and stage 4 of the field-work for this research, “Demystifying the *Muslimah* – Exploring perceptions of young Muslim women in Britain”. This research hopes to inform alternate, and more balanced, understandings of Muslim women. As a convert who *chose* her faith, I believe it is necessary for us Muslim women to articulate our stories within multicultural society. Often Muslims complain about misrepresentation by the mainstream media, but through this research I have realised that we as Muslims are not doing much to clarify our stances about our faith and also to clarify our ‘normalness’. This is what I hope we can do through research stages 3 and 4, *InshaAllah*. Stage 3 is about the creation of Digital Stories and stage 4 is about sharing these stories with people from other faith backgrounds or with those who do not subscribe to any formal faith tradition.

### So what is a Digital Story?

There are various understandings and definitions of digital stories. One of the best, but also one of the vaguest, states that it is a way or a method in which the age-old tradition of storytelling is revived using modern digital tools. We have all listened to stories as kids and continue to watch movies which are also stories. Many of us have also *told* stories, to younger siblings, to kids, to students we may have been teaching, or simply in conversations where we may have been describing an incident to friends. When I interviewed you, all of you told me your stories. This is all that I want you to do again, tell a story – tell your story, the only difference being that this time you will tell your story for a different audience.

Technically, I define digital stories as ‘a three-minute long personal narratives accompanied by a slide-show of relevant still pictures’. The photographs are put into a sequential order so that they are always relevant to the aspect of the story that is being told. You have all seen my digital story and hopefully know what I mean. For me the narrative is the strongest aspect of the story, it is the life and the breath of the story. The pictures must however strengthen the story’s meaning for the audience and hold their attention.

Other technology is sometimes used in digital stories and if we stick to the initial definition then even a full-length feature film may be classified as a digital story. However to keep this research manageable and also to capture strong and meaningful narratives (rather than getting distracted with technological gizmos), I hope for stories to follow the format outlined in the above paragraph and in the sample story.



## **Objectives**

Digital Stories have been used in earlier research and have proven to be thought-provoking both for the person who makes the digital stories as well as for those who view them. I am hoping that this will prove true for this research as well. I hope it will empower you to understand your contributions to multi-cultural society and to think about your role, aspirations, achievements, and challenges you may face as a Muslim woman. I also hope it will enable the viewer to see and *know* Muslim women in a more balanced way – as contributing members within a diverse society. I have three broad objectives for the story,

- i. To facilitate more balanced understandings of Islam
- ii. To demystify the *Muslimah*
- iii. To initiate and further inter-community dialogue.

## **Step-by-step instructions**

1. You will need to think about the story you want to tell and write around 300 – 400 words about it.
2. All stories have three components – a beginning, a plot and an end - a digital story (DST) must have the same three components. The beginning clarifies your position and any other information that the audience needs to know right in the beginning. The plot is the storyline, the content that makes your story interesting and the reasons why it must be told. The end closes your story, with loose ends resolved and a way forward if necessary.
3. It is good to re-read the stories a few times and edit to your satisfaction
4. Then we will record your narration of the written story.
5. You will also need pictures that you think are appropriate for audiences to see. Pictures can be in any format – digital pictures can be given to me when we meet, you can bring them on a pen drive whenever we meet next or e-mail them to me. Album pictures (paper-style) will have to be scanned which I can do.
6. The bare minimum for pictures would be 4 per minute, so for a 3-minute long DST we would need at least 12 pictures. A few more would work fine too.
7. We will then have to put the pictures together to create a DST, using any software designed for this purpose – Windows moviemaker, Microsoft Photo story or even PowerPoint can be used. I prefer Microsoft Photo story 3. This is not very difficult and can be done in a few minutes. We can work on this together when we meet.
8. You will have to sign a consent form which will allow me to use your pictures, your voice and your DST



**Appendix J: Likert Scale Used to Measure Change in Focus Groups' Perceptions of Muslim women**

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Muslim Women are oppressed.					
2. Islam encourages Women to be educated.					
3. Muslim Women are more oppressed than other women.					
4. I can understand Muslim girls.					
5. I would want to be friends with a Muslim girl.					
6. The <i>hijab</i> is a cultural statement.					
7. Muslim girls are like other women.					
8. Muslim faith holds you back.					
9. British Islam is radicalised.					
10. The <i>hijab</i> is a religious statement.					
11. Muslim faith gives you strength.					
12. I could not be friends with a Muslim girl.					
13. Islam is compatible with Britishness.					
14. The <i>hijab</i> is Oppressive.					
15. Muslim girls can do anything that other girls can do.					
16. I could be friends with a Muslim girl.					



## Appendix K: Raw Data from Focus Groups

### Focus Group I - PGCE Students - 1st October 2009

Scale Item	BEFORE										
	Participants' Responses										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Item 1	3	2	3	4	5	2	2	4	4	3	3
Item 2	2	4	3	3	4	2	4	4	4	3	3
Item 3	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	3	2	2	4
Item 4	4	3	2	4	4	2	3	3	3	3	4
Item 5	4	3	4	5	3	3	3	4	5	3	5
Item 6	2	2	1	1	1	3	2	2	2	3	4
Item 7	5	3	4	4	5	2	4	5	4	5	3
Item 8	4	4	5	3	5	4	4	4	3	3	4
Item 9	3	4	3	4	4	2	3	4	2	3	3
Item 10	3	2	4	4	5	4	2	5	2	4	4
Item 11	4	1	2	4	4	3	4	4	4	3	5
Item 12	4	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5
Item 13	2	4	3	2	4	4	3	4	4	3	3
Item 14	4	4	4	5	5	4	3	4	5	4	4
Item 15	2	3	4	2	5	4	4	5	2	3	3
Item 16	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	4	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>62</b>

Scale Item	AFTER										
	Participants' Responses										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Item 1	3	3	3	5	5	4	4	5	4	4	4
Item 2	3	4	4	5	5	2	3	5	4	3	4
Item 3	3	2	3	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	4
Item 4	4	3	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	3	4
Item 5	4	3	5	5	3	3	3	4	4	4	5
Item 6	2	1	3	2	3	4	2	2	1	2	4
Item 7	5	4	4	4	5	4	5	5	4	4	5
Item 8	3	3	2	4	5	3	3	4	4	3	5
Item 9	3	4	2	4	3	2	3	3	4	3	3
Item 10	4	2	4	5	5	4	3	5	4	4	5
Item 11	4	5	4	5	5	4	4	5	4	4	5
Item 12	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	2	3	5
Item 13	3	4	4	3	4	4	3	5	4	2	3
Item 14	3	3	4	5	5	3	3	4	4	3	4
Item 15	3	4	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	5
Item 16	4	5	5	5	5	5	3	5	5	4	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>70</b>



## Focus Group II - Cheltenham Interfaith Female Members - 1st October 2009

Scale Item	BEFORE															
	Participants' Responses															
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Item 1	2	2	4	4	5	4	2	4	3	3	3	4	3	3	2	3
Item 2	3	4	4	4	5	5	3	3	3	2	3	5	2	2	2	4
Item 3	3	3	2	3	5	5	2	3	3	3	4	4	2	2	2	3
Item 4	5	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	4
Item 5	5	3	3	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	3	4	4	4
Item 6	1	2	4	2	3	2	2	4	4	2	2	1	1	2	3	2
Item 7	4	4	4	4	3	4	2	2	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4
Item 8	3	3	4	4	5	5	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	2	3
Item 9	4	3	2	3	3	5	4	4	3	3	2	3	3	2	2	3
Item 10	4	4	4	4	3	4	5	2	4	4	4	5	5	4	2	4
Item 11	3	3	3	4	4	5	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	2	4
Item 12	5	3	4	4	5	5	2	4	5	5	4	5	3	4	4	5
Item 13	4	4	3	3	5	5	1	4	4	4	2	4	3	4	3	3
Item 14	2	3	2	3	5	5	2	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	2	3
Item 15	2	2	2	3	3	4	1	2	2	3	4	2	1	4	2	4
Item 16	5	4	4	4	3	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	3	4	4	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>58</b>

Scale Item	AFTER															
	Participants' Responses															
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Item 1	3	4	4	4	5	4	3	3	4	4	3	4	3	3	3	3
Item 2	4	4	5	4	5	5	3	2	4	4	3	4	2	4	4	3.5
Item 3	4	4	3	4	5	4	2	3	3	3	4	4	2	3	2	3
Item 4	4	4	3	3	3	4	3	4	4	3	3	2	3	3	4	4
Item 5	4	4	3	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	3	4	4	4
Item 6	4	2	4	2	3	2	4	2	2	2	2	4	1	3	2	2
Item 7	5	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	5	4	4	4	4	5	3	4
Item 8	3	5	4	4	5	1	2	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	2	3
Item 9	4	4	2	3	2	5	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	3
Item 10	4	4	4	4	3	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	5	4	2	4
Item 11	5	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	3	4	4	4
Item 12	4	4	5	4	4	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	3	4	2	5
Item 13	4	4	3	4	5	5	2	2	4	3	3	3	3	4	3	3
Item 14	3	3	3	4	5	4	2	2	4	3	4	4	3	4	4	3
Item 15	4	3	2	3	3	4	1	2	3	4	3	2	1	2	3	3
Item 16	5	4	4	4	4	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	3	4	4	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>57</b>



## FOCUS GROUP III - BA Education Students - 8th October 2009

Scale Item	BEFORE						
	Participants' Responses						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Item 1	3	2	1	3	2	3	3
Item 2	4	3	3	5	2	3	3
Item 3	3	2	2	2	2	3	3
Item 4	4	5	5	4	2	3	3
Item 5	5	3	5	5	3	5	5
Item 6	3	3	3	1	4	2	3
Item 7	4	5	5	5	2	4	4
Item 8	3	3	3	4	2	3	3
Item 9	3	2	3	3	2	4	3
Item 10	4	3	3	5	4	4	3
Item 11	4	5	3	3	2	3	3
Item 12	5	5	5	4	3	4	5
Item 13	5	5	3	4	2	4	4
Item 14	3	3	3	3	2	3	3
Item 15	5	3	5	4	2	3	3
Item 16	5	5	5	5	3	4	5
<b>Total</b>	63	57	57	60	39	55	56

Scale Item	AFTER						
	Participants' Responses						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Item 1	4	4	2	3	3	5	4
Item 2	4	3	4	4	4	4	3
Item 3	4	3	2	2	3	2	4
Item 4	4	5	5	5	3	4	4
Item 5	4	3	5	3	5	2	4
Item 6	2	2	1	2	2	2	2
Item 7	4	5	5	4	4	4	4
Item 8	4	4	4	3	3	4	4
Item 9	4	4	3	3	3	5	2
Item 10	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Item 11	4	5	3	5	4	3	4
Item 12	5	5	5	3	5	4	5
Item 13	5	5	3	4	4	5	4
Item 14	4	4	3	3	3	4	4
Item 15	4	4	5	5	4	4	3
Item 16	4	5	5	3	5	4	4
<b>Total</b>	64	65	59	56	59	60	59



## Appendix L: Glossary

Unless otherwise mentioned, explanations are adapted from the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Esposito 2003). Further details if required are available there.

- Abaya** An outer garment worn by Arabs. Sometime sleeveless  
The Concise Oxford English Dictionary, Twelfth edition . Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2008. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. University of Gloucestershire. 19 April 2010  
<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t23.e50>
- Alhamdulillah** Figure of speech. Praise be to God  
My transliteration and explanation
- Alim**  
(pl. *Ulama*) Men of knowledge. Scholars. Refers to those who have been trained in religious sciences (Quran, *hadith*, *fiqh*, etc. As imam of the local mosque, an *alim* may lead daily prayers, deliver the Friday sermon, and teach children the basics of Islamic law and Quranic recitation. On occasions of birth, death, and marriage, he may also be called upon for prayers or for help in performing the rituals.
- Alimah** Urdu. Scholar. Women of knowledge. Refers to women who have been trained in religious sciences (Quran, *hadith*, *fiqh*, etc.). They do not lead mixed male and female prayer congregations and hence do not become Imams in mosques. However they are counsellors and religious guides for their local communities, especially for women. They also give advice on religious matters.  
My transliteration and explanation
- Al-Kutub Al-Arb'ah** Four books of authentic or correct *hadith* for *Shii* Muslims. They include (1) *Kitab al-Kafi of Kulayni*, (2) *Man la yahduruhu al-Faqih of Shaikh Saduq*, (3) *Tahdhib al-Ahkam by Abu Ja'far al-Tusi* and (4) *Al-Istibsar by Abu Ja'far al-Tusi*.  
My transliteration and explanation
- al-Sufur wa al-hijab** Unveiling and Veiling. Book written by Nazira 'Zain al-Din in 1928  
My transliteration and explanation



<b><i>Ameen</i></b>	Similar to Amen uttered at the end of a prayer or hymn, meaning 'so be it'. The Oxford Dictionary of English (revised edition). Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2005. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. University of Gloucestershire. 19 April 2010 < <a href="http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&amp;entry=t140.e2177">http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&amp;entry=t140.e2177</a>
<b><i>Ansar</i></b>	Companions or supporters. The term applied to people of Medina who supported Muhammad after the <i>hijrah</i> (migration from Mecca to Medina)
<b><i>Aqidah</i></b>	Arabic. Islamic creed or articles of faith. Quranic formulation includes belief in God, angels, prophets, scriptures, and the Day of Judgment.
<b><i>Assalam Alaikum</i></b>	Peace be upon you. Used by Muslims as a greeting. Response is "wa-alaykum al-salaam" (peace be upon you also). Hadith portray use of the greeting as a good work.
<b><i>Astagfirullah</i></b>	Muslim figure of speech - May Allah forgive me. My transliteration and explanation
<b><i>aur</i></b>	Urdu. 'and'. My explanation
<b><i>Ayat</i></b>	Verse of the Quran
<b><i>Azadi</i></b>	Persian. Freedom
<b><i>Behesti Zevar</i></b>	A book written in Urdu by Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanvi in the early 1900s as a means to acquaint women with Islamic knowledge. This book is significant within South Asian (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) Muslim communities. My transliteration and explanation
<b><i>Burka</i></b>	Arabic. Urdu. A long, loose garment covering the whole body from head to feet, worn in public by women in many Muslim countries. The Oxford Dictionary of English (revised edition). Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2005. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. University of Gloucestershire. 19 April 2010 < <a href="http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&amp;entry=t140.e10333">http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&amp;entry=t140.e10333</a> >



<b>Chador/ Chader</b>	Persian. Urdu. Veil. Full-length garment covering a woman from head to foot, typically black in colour. Not mandated by the Quran, although it symbolizes modest dress in Islamic culture.
<b>Char Deewari</b>	Urdu. Four Walls. Symbolises the home or domestic sphere. My explanation
<b>Croyants / Believing Muslims</b>	Muslims who believe in the tenets of Islam, may fast and eat only halal meat, but who are otherwise not regularly observant of Islamic faith practices (Bowen 2007)
<b>Darse Nizami</b>	Traditional syllabus used to train Muslim scholars ( <i>alim</i> and <i>alimah</i> ) in the Indian subcontinent and in communities influenced by South Asian Islam My transliteration and explanation
<b>Din</b>	Way of life for which humans will be held accountable and recompensed accordingly on the Day of Judgment. The word is the root of the Arabic terms for “habit,” “way,” “account,” “obedience,” “judgment,” and “reward,” and is often translated as “religion.” It implies that living in obedience to God is an obligation owed to Him, for which people will be taken to account, judged, and recompensed. [...] <i>Din</i> encompasses beliefs, thought, character, behaviour, and deeds. Thus, if these aspects of life are derived from God's guidance, as originally taught by the prophets, then they comprise Islam. [...] Therefore Islam, or peaceful submission to God in belief, character, rituals, and socio-political and economic interactions, is termed the “way of truth” ( <i>Din al-haqq</i> ), which is accepted by God. This sincere worship of none but Him is the “straight path” established for human life ( <i>al-Din al-qayyim</i> ).
<b>Dupatta</b>	Urdu. Hindi. A length of material worn arranged in two folds over the chest and thrown back around the shoulders, typically with a <i>salwar kameez</i> , by women from the Indian subcontinent The Oxford Dictionary of English (revised edition). Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2005. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. University of Gloucestershire. 19 April 2010 <a href="http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&amp;entry=t140.e23303">http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&amp;entry=t140.e23303</a>
<b>Fariq</b>	Urdu. Idle / free from work / useless My transliteration and explanation



<b>Fasting</b>	In Islam fasting is required during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar, during which all Muslims are required to abstain during daylight hours from eating, drinking, or engaging in sexual activity. Through heightened awareness of their bodily needs, Muslims come to greater awareness of the presence of God and acknowledge gratitude for God's provisions in their lives. Abstinence during Ramadan is required of all Muslims, except children, those who are ill or too elderly, those who are traveling and women who are menstruating, have just given birth, or are breastfeeding.
<b><i>Fatat al-Sharq</i></b>	Young Woman of the East. Periodical launched by Labibah Hashim in 1906 My transliteration and explanation
<b><i>Fatwa</i></b>	Authoritative legal opinion given by a mufti (legal scholar) in response to a question posed by an individual or a court of law.
<b>Habitus</b>	Defined as the acquired habitual patterns of thought, behaviour and taste of any community Scott-Baumann, 2009: 158
<b><i>Hadith</i> (pl. <i>ahadith</i>)</b>	Report of the words and deeds of Muhammad and other early Muslims; considered an authoritative source of revelation, second only to the Quran (sometimes referred to as sayings of the Prophet). Hadith were collected, transmitted, and taught orally for two centuries after Muhammad's (pbuh) death and then began to be collected in written form and codified. They serve as a source of biographical material for Muhammad (pbuh), contextualization of Quranic revelations, and Islamic law.
<b><i>Halal</i></b>	Quranic term used to indicate what is lawful or permitted. Most legal opinions assert the presumption that everything is halal (permissible) unless specifically prohibited by a text. Often used in conjunction with established dietary restrictions, halal can refer to the meat of permitted animals that have been ritually slaughtered, hunted game, over which the name and praise of God have been pronounced, and fish and marine life. Prohibited categories ( <i>haram</i> ) include pork, blood, alcoholic beverages, scavenger animals, carrion, and improperly sacrificed permitted animals.



<b>Hanafi</b>	Sunni Islam school of legal thought ( <i>madhhab</i> ) whose origins are attributed to Abu Hanifah in Kufa, Iraq, in the eighth century. It is one of four madhabibs, the other three are – <i>Shafi</i> , <i>Hanbali</i> and <i>Maliki</i>
<b>Hanbali</b>	Sunni Islam school of legal thought ( <i>madhhab</i> ) whose origins are attributed to Ahmad ibn Hanbal in ninth-century Baghdad. It is one of four madhabibs, the other three are – <i>Shafi</i> , <i>Hanafi</i> and <i>Maliki</i>
<b>Hijab</b>	Traditional Muslim women's head, face, or body covering, of numerous varieties across time and space, often referred to as the “veil.” Hijab is a symbol of modesty, privacy, and morality.
<b>Hijabi</b>	A woman who practises hijab. See hijab My transliteration and explanation
<b>Ibadah</b> <b>pl ibadat</b>	Worship; acts of devotion; service; pl. <i>ibadat</i> . The religious duties of worship incumbent on all Muslims when they come of age and are of sound body and mind. They include the pillars of Islam: profession of faith ( <i>shahadah</i> ), canonical prayer ( <i>salat</i> ), charity ( <i>zakah</i> ), fasting ( <i>sawm</i> ), and pilgrimage to Mecca ( <i>hajj</i> )—as well as striving to live in the path of God and the condition of purity ( <i>taharah</i> ) required for worship and Quran recitation. Also see <i>din</i> .
<b>Ijma</b>	Consensus or agreement. One of four recognized sources of Sunni law. Utilized where the Quran and Sunnah (the first two sources) are silent on a particular issue. There is considerable debate concerning whose opinions are relevant for <i>ijma</i> . Some argue that only the opinions of scholars are relevant. Others contend that <i>ijma</i> includes the consensus of the laity. Most agree that the consensus of Muhammad's Companions, the people of Medina, or the family of the Prophet is authoritative. Once an <i>ijma</i> is established, it serves as a precedent.
<b>Ijtihad</b>	Islamic legal term meaning “independent reasoning,” as opposed to <i>taqlid</i> (imitation). One of four sources of Sunni law. Utilized where the Quran and Sunnah (the first two sources) are silent. It requires a thorough knowledge of theology, revealed texts, and legal theory ( <i>usul al-fiqh</i> ); a sophisticated capacity for legal reasoning; and a thorough knowledge of Arabic. It is considered a required religious duty for those qualified to perform it. It should be practiced by means of analogical or syllogistic reasoning ( <i>qiyas</i> ). Its results may not contradict the Quran, and it may not be used in cases where consensus ( <i>ijma</i> ) has been



reached, according to many scholars. Sunnis believe ijihad is fallible since more than one interpretation of a legal issue is possible. Islamic reformers call for a revitalization of ijihad in the modern world

- Insha Allah*** If God wills. Used in statements of what one hopes will happen in the future, reminding the believer that nothing happens unless God wills it and that only what God wills will happen. Demonstrates the belief that God's will supersedes human will. Common phrase in everyday speech.
- Islamophobe** One who is afraid / fearful of Islam. See Islamophobia  
My transliteration and explanation
- Islamophobia** Islamophobia understood as 'unfounded hostility towards Islam' (Runnymede 1997:4) is a contentious word. The authors of *Islamophobia Issues, Challenges and Action* feel that, 'It may be more apt to speak of 'Islamophobias' rather than of a single phenomenon. Each version of Islamophobia has its own features as well as similarities with, and borrowings from, other versions'. It is a new name for an old fear because 'hostility towards Islam and Muslims has been a feature of European societies since the eighth century of the common era. It has taken different forms at different times and has fulfilled a variety of functions (Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia 2004: 7)
- ISoc** Abbreviation usually used for Student Islamic Societies in UK Universities.  
My transliteration and explanation
- Jihad*** From the Arabic root meaning "to strive," "to exert," "to fight"; exact meaning depends on context. May express a struggle against one's evil inclinations, an exertion to convert unbelievers, or a struggle for the moral betterment of the Islamic community. Today often used without any religious connotation, with a meaning more or less equivalent to the English word crusade (as in "a crusade against drugs").
- Jilbab*** Generic term for women's outer garment (shawl, cloak, wrap) in Arabian sedentary communities before and after the rise of Islam. The Quran (33:59) instructs Muslim women to cloak themselves as a mark of status and as a defensive measure against sexual harassment in public places.



<b><i>jubah</i></b>	A loose outer garment. Used in Malaysian contexts to refer to the hijab My transliteration and explanation
<b><i>Khawatein</i></b>	Urdu. Woman My transliteration and explanation
<b><i>Khimar</i></b>	The word khimar refers to] all such pieces of cloth which are used to cover the head. It is a piece of cloth which is used by a woman to cover her head. <a href="http://www.muhababah.com/khimar.htm">http://www.muhababah.com/khimar.htm</a>
<b>Koran</b>	Misspelling of Quran. See Quran.
<b><i>Madhhab</i></b> <b>pl. <i>Madhabib</i></b>	School of Legal Thought
<b><i>Mahram</i></b>	In Islamic law, <i>mahram</i> connotes a state of consanguinity precluding marriage.
<b><i>Maliki</i></b>	Sunni Islam school of law attributed to Malik ibn Anas al-Asbahi in the eighth century in the Arabian Peninsula. It is one of four madhabibs, the other three are – <i>Shafi</i> , <i>Hanbali</i> and <i>Hanafi</i>
<b><i>Maqsad</i></b>	Urdu. Greater aim / vision for life / goal My transliteration and explanation
<b><i>Marktaba</i></b>	Urdu. Position / Station in society My transliteration and explanation
<b><i>Mas'ala</i></b>	Urdu. Routine matters or problems for which a solution may be required. My transliteration and explanation
<b><i>Mawlana</i></b>	My master. Honorific term originally reserved for addressing rulers.
<b><i>Mufti</i></b>	Jurist capable of giving, upon request, an authoritative although nonbinding opinion (fatwa) on a point of Islamic law. These opinions are generally based on precedent and compiled in legal reference manuals. In Twelver <i>Shiism</i> an analogous role came to be played by a <i>mujtahid</i> . In some contexts, muftis are appointed by the state and serve on advisory councils.



<b>Muhajabah</b>	A woman who practises hijab. See hijab My transliteration and explanation
<b>Muhammadans / Mahometanism</b>	Terms used to refer to Islam and Muslims. Many Muslims would disagree with its usage. Some would consider it offensive. My explanation
<b>Mujtahid</b>	One who exercises independent reasoning (ijtihad) in the interpretation of Islamic law. Qualifications include training in recognized schools of Islamic law and extensive knowledge of the Quran and hadith. In Sunni Islam, the title is reserved for the founders of the four official schools of Islamic law, although modern Islamic reformers call for the revival of ijtihad as a means of accommodating new ideas and conditions.
<b>Muslimah</b>	a Muslim woman The Oxford Dictionary of English (revised edition). Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2005. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. University of Gloucestershire. 19 April 2010 <a href="http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&amp;entry=t140.e50729">http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&amp;entry=t140.e50729</a>
<b>Mustalah al-hadith</b>	Science of hadith classification My explanation
<b>Niqab</b>	A veil worn by some Muslim women, covering all of the face and having two holes for the eyes. niqab The Oxford Dictionary of English (revised edition). Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2005. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. University of Gloucestershire. 19 April 2010 <a href="http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&amp;entry=t140.e52180">http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&amp;entry=t140.e52180</a>
<b>Niqabi</b>	A woman who wears a <i>niqab</i> My transliteration and explanation
<b>Nisa</b>	Arabic. Woman My transliteration and explanation
<b>Nusayba al- Ansariyya</b>	A <i>sahabiya</i> and female warrior who fought in the battle of Uhud during the lifetime of the Prophet (pbuh) (Bewley 1999)
<b>pbuh</b>	<i>Sala Allah Alayhi wa-Salaam</i> Peace and blessings be upon him (abbreviated PBUH). Epithet used by pious Muslims in speech and writing as a sign of respect and honour after the name of a prophet or holy person, especially Muhammad.



<b><i>Pratiqants / Practising Muslims</i></b>	Muslims who pray regularly and who may wear the <i>hijab</i> or grow beards, as distinguished from croyants who believe in the tenets of Islam, may fast and eat only halal meat, but who are otherwise not regularly observant of Islamic faith practices (Bowen 2007).
<b><i>Purdah</i></b>	Seclusion. Term referring to various practices designed to protect women from men in traditional Muslim societies, including confining women to the company of other women and close male relatives in their home or in separate female living quarters, veiling, self-effacing mannerisms, and the separation of men and women in public places. These practices reflect both social and religious custom.
<b>Quran/Quranic Koran / Koranic (mispelling)</b>	The book of Islamic revelation; scripture. The term means "recitation." The Quran is believed to be the word of God transmitted through the Prophet Muhammad. The Quran proclaims God's existence and will and is the ultimate source of religious knowledge for Muslims. The Quran serves as both record and guide for the Muslim community, transcending time and space. Muslims have dedicated their best minds and talents to the exegesis and recitation of the Quran.
<b><i>Quraysh</i></b>	Powerful Meccan tribe at the time of the Prophet Muhammad; descendants of Qusayy, who united them. The <i>Quraysh</i> were prosperous merchants controlling Mecca and trade in the region. Muhammad was born into the Hashemite clan of the <i>Quraysh</i> tribe. Presently the keys to the Kaaba are held by the <i>Quraysh</i> clan.
<b><i>Ramadan</i></b>	Ninth month of the lunar calendar, during which fasting is required. See Also Fasting
<b><i>Rahayi</i></b>	Persian. Liberty
<b><i>Sadaqa / Sadaqah</i></b>	Charity, alms, freely made offering. Sometimes used synonymously with <i>zakah</i> , which refers to the alms required of all Muslims of means. Can also be a supererogatory charity, expiation for offenses (e.g., Quran 2:271; 9:104), or a way of making up for not having performed certain rituals (e.g., cutting the hair or shaving the head after pilgrimage).



<b>Sahaba Sahabiya (feminine) Companions</b>	Those believed to have lived, interacted with, heard, or seen the Prophet Muhammad. In Sunni Islam, they are considered to be the most authoritative sources of information about the conduct of Muhammad and normative examples in their own right, immune from major sins and beyond criticism. The <i>Shiis</i> view many of the Companions as guilty of preventing their first imam, Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661), from succeeding to the caliphate, and hence morally culpable.
<b>Sahih Sitta</b>	Six books of authentic or correct <i>hadith</i> for <i>Sunni</i> Muslims. They include (1) <i>Sahih al-Bukhari</i> , (2) <i>Sahih Muslim</i> , (3) <i>Muwatta al-Imam Malik</i> , (4) <i>Sunan Abu Dawud</i> or <i>Sahih Abu Dawud</i> , (5) <i>Sahih al-Tirmidhi</i> , (6) <i>Sahih an-Nisa'i</i> , and <i>Sahih Ibn Majah</i> or <i>Sunan Ibn Majah</i> . My transliteration and explanation
<b>Salat al-Jumma</b>	Friday congregational prayer required of all <i>Sunni</i> men but not generally of women. For <i>Shiis</i> , it is required of every man only when an imam is present. If no imam is present, it is required only of the community in general. <i>Salat al-jumma</i> is held in the mosque and performed in straight lines, with men in front and women and children either behind or in a separate area. The <i>khutbah</i> (sermon) is a feature particular to the Friday service.
<b>Salwar Kameez</b>	Urdu. Hindi. Pair of light, loose, pleated trousers ( <i>salwar</i> ), usually tapering to a tight fit around the ankles, worn in the Indian subcontinent typically with a <i>kameez</i> - a long tunic. (the two together being a <i>salwar kameez</i> ). The Oxford Dictionary of English (revised edition). Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2005. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. University of Gloucestershire. 19 April 2010 <a href="http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&amp;entry=t140.e68003">http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&amp;entry=t140.e68003</a>
<b>Shafii</b>	Sunni Islam school of Law School of Islamic law founded by Muhammad ibn Idris ibn al-Abbas ibn Uthman ibn Shafii in the eighth century. It is one of four madhabibs, the other three are – <i>Hanafi</i> , <i>Hanbali</i> and <i>Maliki</i> .



- Shariah** God's eternal and immutable will for humanity, as expressed in the Quran and Muhammad's example (*Sunnah*), considered binding for all believers; ideal Islamic law. The Quran contains only about ninety verses directly and specifically addressing questions of law. Islamic legal discourse refers to these verses as God's law and incorporates them into legal codes. The remainder of Islamic law is the result of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), human efforts to codify Islamic norms in practical terms and legislate for cases not specifically dealt with in the Quran and *Sunnah*.
- Shii / Shii Islam** The *Shii* are a branch of the Muslim community who believe that they are the followers or party of Ali and believe that Muhammad's religious leadership, spiritual authority, and divine guidance were passed on to his descendants, beginning with his son-in-law and cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib, his daughter, Fatimah, and their sons, Hasan and Husayn. There are three main branches of Shiis today: the Zaydis, the Ismailis (Seveners), and the Ithna Asharis (Twelvers or Imamis).
- Sirah** Literary genre that developed out of narrative histories of Muhammad's (pbuh) life and activities, often comparing him to other prophets. Similar to Jewish and Christian traditions, *sirah* chronicles the creation and history of the world up through the time of Muhammad (pbuh), showing Muhammad's (pbuh) life and work as the fulfilment of divine revelation and providing a basis for Muslim views of history
- Sunnah** Established custom, normative precedent, conduct, and cumulative tradition, typically based on Muhammad's example. The actions and sayings of Muhammad are believed to complement the divinely revealed message of the Quran, constituting a source for establishing norms for Muslim conduct and making it a primary source of Islamic law. In the legal field, *Sunnah* complements and stands alongside the Quran, giving precision to its precepts. *Sunnah* encompasses knowledge believed to have been passed down from previous generations and representing an authoritative, valued, and continuing corpus of beliefs and customs. See also *hadith*.



<b>Sunni</b> <b>Sunni Islam</b>	The <i>Sunnis</i> are the largest branch of the Muslim community, at least 85 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims. The name is derived from the Sunnah, the exemplary behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad. [...] <i>Sunni</i> life is guided by four schools of legal thought: <i>Hanafi</i> , <i>Maliki</i> , <i>Shafii</i> , and <i>Hanbali</i> . Although <i>Sunni</i> Islam comprises a variety of theological and legal schools, attitudes, and outlooks conditioned by historical setting, locale, and culture, <i>Sunnis</i> around the world share some common points including acceptance of the legitimacy of the first four successors of Muhammad (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali).
<b>Surah</b>	Chapters of the Quran
<b>Tafsir</b>	Quranic exegesis. Elucidation, explanation, interpretation, and commentary carried out in order to understand the Quran and its commandments. <i>Tafsir</i> is carried out in linguistic, juristic, and theological fields.
<b>Tahrir al-Mar'a</b>	Women's Liberation. Book written by Qasim Amin in 1899 My transliteration and explanation
<b>Tarbiyyah</b>	Upbringing, education. In medieval Islam, a proper education for the upper classes included both religious and humanistic disciplines ( <i>adab</i> ). In the contemporary world, refers to child rearing, education (usually secular), and pedagogy.
<b>Uhud, Battle of</b>	Battle fought in 625 against Muslims by Meccan forces seeking revenge for the Muslim victory in the Battle of Badr. Muhammad was injured and seventy of his followers and allies were killed. The loss deflated Muslim elation over their victory in the Battle of Badr.
<b>Ummah</b>	Muslim community. A fundamental concept in Islam, expressing the essential unity and theoretical equality of Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings. In the Quran, designates people to whom God has sent a prophet or people who are objects of a divine plan of salvation.
<b>Ummul Mu'minin</b> <b>pl. Ummahat-al</b> <b>Mu'mininim</b>	Mothers of the believers, refers to the wives of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). My transliteration and explanation.



**Usul al-Fiqh**

Roots of law. The body of principles and investigative methodologies through which practical legal rules are developed from the foundational sources. The primary base of law is the Quran. The second source is the *Sunnah*, reports about the sayings, actions, or tacit approvals of the Prophet. The third source is the consensus (*ijma*) of all Muslim interpretive scholars in a specific age on a legal rule about an issue not covered in the Quran or Sunnah. Most *Sunni* scholars consider consensus binding; others, including *Shii* scholars, say such consensus is impossible. The fourth source is analogy (*qiyas*), or rule by precedent.

**Zenana**

Persian.Urdu. (in India and Iran) the part of a house for the seclusion of women.

The Oxford Dictionary of English (revised edition). Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2005. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. University of Gloucestershire. 19 April 2010

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