'An Underclass in Purdah'? Discrepant Representations of Identity and the Experiences of Young-British-Asian-Muslim-Women[1]

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On 29 March 1993 a B.B.C. television Panorama programme entitled 'Underclass in Purdah' set out to challenge the myth of uniform 'Asian success' in contemporary Britain. Focusing on two cities with large South Asian heritage communities, Bradford and Birmingham, the documentary unpacked the different economic and educational experiences of Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis respectively. As the presenter of the programme stated by way of introduction: 'The stereotype "Asian" is the hardworking businessman or doctor doing well for himself [*sic*] but for the majority of Muslim Asians that stereotype is a myth. A new generation of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis — potentially the biggest ethnic group in the country — is growing up angry and alienated from white society. In tonight's programme we lift the veil on this new underclass'.

The Pakistanis and Bangladeshis referred to by Panorama are those three-quarters of a million or so people who have now settled or been born in Britain since largely unskilled men, first came to work in low-paid sectors of the economy during the post-war boom of the 1950s and 1960s.[2] When, for various reasons, these

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[2] For an assessment of Muslim numbers in Britain see Ceri Peach, *Estimates of the 1991 Muslim population of Great Britain*, unpublished paper given to the Exploratory Seminar on Statistics and the U.K. Religious Communities, at the University of Derby, 24–25 May, 1994.

economic migrants decided to reunite their families in Britain an elaborate process of cultural (including religious) reconstruction began.[3] British-Asian-Muslims are now here to stay. However, global economic recession during the late 1970s and early 1980s hit Pakistanis and Bangladeshis particularly hard. As a largely unskilled work-force with limited skills in English many first generation British-Asian-Muslims have found it difficult to secure new jobs in an employment market now dominated by the service sector.[4] Moreover, as Panorama illustrated, their children are now represented as the education system's current 'underachievers'.[5]

By way of explanation for the relative socio-economic deprivation of British-Asian-Muslims — a trend documented more elaborately in the 1991 Census — Panorama usefully mentioned the wide-spread discrimination that this constituency routinely experiences.[6] Since the Rushdie Affair in 1989 for example, racialized Islamophobic discourse has often produced Muslims as 'outsiders within' the British nation.[7] Moreover, the B.B.C. television programme also considered some of the consequences that the context of migration has had for British-Asian-Muslims. For example, a large number of first-generation migrants in Bradford and Birmingham are in fact from peasant farmer families in Mirpur, a Panjabi-speaking district of Pakistani administered 'Azad' Kashmir, which has long been noted for its economic underdevelopment and political marginalization.[8] Therefore, unlike the many better educated and structurally advantaged British-Asian Hindus and Sikhs of Indian heritage, British-Asian-Muslims of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage are, by contrast, finding it more difficult to, as Panorama put it, 'escape the ghetto'.

[3] See P. Lewis, *Islamic Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1994) for a recent exposition on this process of religious reconstruction.

[4] For an overview of the South Asian presence in Britain see Roger Ballard, 'Introduction: the emergence of Desh Pardesh', in *Desh Pardesh*, ed. Roger Ballard (London: Hurst, 1994), 1-34.

[5] T. Jones, *Britain's ethnic minorities* (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1993) documents the general social and economic deprivation of many Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in Britain. However, the numbers of young Pakistanis studying in higher education would seem to give some room for optimism. In 1994 twice as many Pakistanis aged eighteen to twenty-seven as whites were entering British universities. This insight comes from T. Modood, 'Pakistanis in Britain: outlines of a socio-economic profile', a paper presented at a workshop on Pakistanis in Britain at Queen Elizabeth House, 21 St Giles, University of Oxford, on 28 February 1997.

[6] An examination of the demography of the Muslim population of Britain as suggested by the 1991 Census is offered by M. Anwar, *Muslims in Britain: 1991 census and other statistical sources* (Birmingham: Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations [C.S.I.C.], Selly Oak Colleges, 1993).

[7] See, for example, The Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all* (London: The Runnymede Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, 133 Aldersgate Street, EC1A 4JA, 1997). Hereafter, The Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia*.

[8] Most work on Mirpur has been conducted by Roger Ballard. See, for example, his article: 'The context and consequences of migration: Jullundur and Mirpur compared', *New Community*, 11 (1983), 117-36.

Unfortunately, while the Panorama documentary attempted to give voice to the diversity which constitutes the experience of being British-Asian today, the title of the programme — 'Underclass in Purdah' — re-inscribed the settled authority of many 'culturalist' assumptions about 'ethnic' minorities in Britain. Functionalist theories of 'strong' cultural institutions in the Indian sub-continent such as religion, family and caste have often produced an account of human experience that is overly deterministic and pathological.[9] Moreover, as the opening summary of the Panorama programme cited above reveals, media and academic representations of 'Muslim Asian culture' are also profoundly gendered.[10] On the one hand, Panorama's reference to Muslim 'anger and alienation' drew upon images of 'deviant' young men making their protests 'on the street'.[11] However, on the other hand, Panorama's 'playful' reference to 'lifting the veil' on an 'Underclass in Purdah' alluded to an essentialist set of assumptions about Muslim Asian women as *necessarily* the confined bearers of traditional *izzat* (family honour) and *sharm* (shame) in contradistinction to the goals of a democratic and secular society.

'Underclass in Purdah' argued that conservative attitudes towards the participation of women in the work-place — *purdah* of course, refers to the seclusion of Muslim women in the private sphere — have been a major factor in the emergence of an Muslim Asian 'underclass' in contemporary Britain. Even the very modern, [and very male] Pakistani cricket celebrity, Imran Khan, was wheeled out by the BBC to authorize the understanding that traditional interpretations of religion and culture *necessarily* cause 'problems' both for Muslim women themselves and for wider society: 'Islam never stops a women from working or from getting an education. My sisters are all educated and they are all doing well. I think that its just entirely the customs and its a very sad thing because I wish that people would realise that these are just some very silly traditions we've picked up'.[12]

The discrepancies inherent in Panorama's representations of an 'Underclass in Purdah', such as the immensely privileged class

[9] For a critique of anthropological writing in this area see Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (C.C.C.S.), ed. *The Empire strikes back*, (London: Hutchinson, 1982).

[10] For a topical discussion of some of these issues see Rupa Huq, 'Asian Kool? bhangra and beyond' *Dis-orienting rhythms: the politics of the New Asian dance music*, eds Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk and Ashwani Sharma (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996), 61–80.

[11] 'An underclass in Purdah' represented the inner-city district of Bradford, Manning-ham, as 'a Muslim ghetto' where unemployment, drugs and prostitution are endemic. Indeed, one weekend during June 1995 Asian youth took to the streets in protest when police arrested two young men during an apparently innocent game of street-football. The confrontation with the police that ensued was spuriously explained by West Yorkshire Police in terms of the 'alienation' of second and third generations of Asians caught 'between two cultures' (*Guardian*, 12 June 1995).

[12] BBC Television, 'Panorama: an underclass in Purdah', 29 March 1993.

background of Khan and his 'liberated' Muslim sisters, would seem to have been left on the cutting-room floor at the B.B.C. However, some scholars like Brah have begun to contextualize the significance of culturalist explanations of British-Asian-Muslim-women's under-representation in the wage labour market.[13] Crucially, she interrogates hegemonic constructions of 'the Muslim women' in dominant discourse arguing that this sort of categorization must be distinguished from 'Muslim women' with diverse historical and social experiences.[14] Indeed, while not denying the significance of *purdah* in constraining women's action in some circumstances, she argues that the institution cannot be seen 'as fixed and unchanging'.[15] Of course some women do reinforce the experience of patriarchy but most of Brah's sample were found to 'endorse the view that women should have the right to undertake paid forms of work outside the home'.[16] Contrary to all popular representations, only one in four of her respondents cited notions of *purdah* or patriarchal *izzat* in order to explain their lack of paid work.

Academics like Brah are not the only ones to try and recover the diversity of British-Asian-Muslim-women's experiences in the face of reductionist dominant discourse. A group of five young British-Asian women (three Muslims, a Hindu and a Sikh) studying at Carlton Bolling College — one of the schools featured in the programme — took issue with the way in which they and their school had been represented in the programme. Indeed, the young women in question were eventually successful in having three of their six complaints upheld by the Broadcasting Complaints Commission (B.C.C.).[17] It was their momentary contestation of hegemonic constructions of British-Asian women in Britain that prompted me to visit Carlton Bolling College during 1994 as a part of my doctoral work on Muslim identity in Bradford.

Initially, I spoke to just one of the students involved in making the complaint about Panorama, the other four having left school after completing their 'A' level studies. All were hoping to go on to university. Notably, Kookab told me that she and her friends had 'read' the programme as an example of the way in which 'the media reproduces ruling class ideology', having studied these very issues in their 'A' level Communications course.[18] [An 'Underclass

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[13] Avtar Brah, 'Race and culture in the gendering of labour markets: South Asian young Muslim women and the labour market', *New Community*, 19 (1993), 441–58.

[14] Ibid., 443.

[15] Ibid., 448.

[16] Ibid., 456.

[17] Broadcasting Complaints Commission (B.C.C.), *Complaint from Mr Mervyn Flecknoe and five students at Carlton-Bolling College* (London: Grosvenor Gardens House, 35 and 37 Grosvenor Gardens, London, SW1W 0BS, 1994).

[18] The names of the young women that I use in this paper have been changed as I assured all my respondents about the confidentiality of my research.

in Purdah' indeed!]. Having interviewed Kookab, I wanted to speak to more young people about the way in which their own experiences and representations of identity contested dominant categorizations of their essential 'otherness'. Therefore, during the school term of summer 1994 I conducted both participant observation and informal and semi-structured interviews with young British-Asian-Muslim women and men in the lower-sixth form on a daily basis for a period of around a month. It is the gendered dimensions of the material I collected that forms the main body of this paper.

Before I make my ethnographic representations however, I reflect on how my own subjective experiences impacted upon the research I undertook in Bradford. Only then do I continue with an account of my work at Carlton Bolling College. I lay particular stress upon the way in which young British-Asian-Muslim-women represented their diverse experiences in terms of the situationally constructed social positions of religion and culture, as well as gender, 'race' and class. Finally in this paper, I consider how best to theorize the diversity of subjective experience on the one hand and the way in which certain experiences become prioritized as situational identifications on the other. In general terms I argue that we have to get away from the simplistic culturalist notion that grand-narratives such as 'Islam' straightforwardly position and contain the variety of people's experiences.

Partial Connections: Reflexivity, Representation and the Role of Experience in the Research Process
Both researchers and respondents 'speak' from a variety of subject positions all of which are context bound. Therefore, in this section, I want to reflect briefly on the fact that my own identity as a young, white, male, university student of Irish-Catholic descent is of course just as contingent as that of the young women I go on to explore later. In particular I want to examine a few examples of the way in which my historically and socially located experiences were represented during the research process and how these impacted upon the sorts of connections I was able to make with respondents in Bradford.

Whilst in Bradford I found that various identities were ascribed to me by respondents in different situations. However, depending on the situation, I was sometimes able to renegotiate my role in the research process by talking about my own experiences. For example, the first identification to be ascribed to me in Carlton Bolling College sixth-form was that of *gora* (white man). Nevertheless, I soon made a connection with the young people there through a discussion of interests we shared in common, such as contemporary music. Only then did I attempt to ask questions

about the experience of growing up as a Muslim or Asian in Bradford.

I did not, therefore, choose to represent myself in any one way consistently throughout my research. It depended very much on the context in question. However, I did routinely represent the fact that my own family are economic migrants from Ireland. Indeed, I was able to recount experiences of my own that I anticipated might generate some discussion. For example, I shall never forget visiting my uncle's farm in Ireland as a teenager and being met with the salutation, 'Welcome, Englishman'. Having grown up in Britain with a profound ambivalence about 'belonging' — if not living — 'here', there could have been no more uncomfortable mode of greeting from a relative at 'home' in Ireland. These were experiences that some of my young respondents and I shared in common. Many had visited Pakistan or 'Azad' Kashmir and had their 'difference' objectified for them by relatives.

I do not, of course, want to essentialize my migrant heritage as a point of connection with the people I met in Bradford. My connections with respondents were partial because the relationship between researchers and their respondents is always cross-cut by social divisions, of gender, 'race' and class. One example will serve to illustrate my point with reference to the gendered dimensions of my subjectivity.

The literature on British-Asian-Muslims is full of references to the way in which the gender of the researcher impacts upon the possibility of access to female respondents.[19] While I found no difficulty interacting with young women in schools and colleges like Carlton Bolling College, arranging meetings with women of their mothers' generation proved more difficult. I was therefore very pleased when, during the early stages of my fieldwork in Bradford, I made a number of visits to a group of women who met to socialize in a 'parents' room' set aside for them in a local school. However, even when I had managed to become an 'honorary woman' for a few moments my gender eventually caught up with me. I went to the school one morning to speak in Urdu to the women about the education of their children. Nasreen, the home-school liaison officer, assured me that my presentation had been clear and as we sipped our tea a conversation was beginning. However, I noticed that the Religious Education assistant and a governor of the school had come into the room for a cup of tea too. Both were male and they sat in another corner of the room.

[19] P. Jeffrey, *Migrants and refugees: Muslim and Christian Pakistani families in Bristol* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). Jeffrey notes that her gender allowed her access to spheres of life not usually open to male researchers.

While I had hoped that my position of 'honorary woman' might persist despite their presence, I was eventually invited to go and sit 'with the men'. They had transformed the nature of the space and, accordingly, the rules governing my presence in it.

Discrepant Representations of Identity and the Variety of Young-British-Asian-Muslim-Womens' Experience

In my introduction to this paper I noted that the first young-British-Asian-Muslim woman I spoke to at Carlton Bolling College was Kookab. It was she who explained to me how the five young women who protested at 'the very bad picture painted of Asians by Panorama' included two other Muslims, a Hindu and a Sikh. Kookab felt that it was important to emphasize that this was not simply 'a Muslim issue' even though upwards of ninety per cent of the school's intake is Muslim. Although Panorama had set out to differentiate between 'Muslims' and other 'Asians', she insisted that 'as far as most white people are concerned, we're all "Pakis"'. Nevertheless, while valorizing a common Asian experience of racism in contemporary Britain, Kookab agreed that Islam had 'come in for most of the flak' during the programme. Indeed, she wanted to contest dominant representations of Islam as necessarily gender-oppressive even though she did not understand herself to be 'religious'. It was rather a matter of ethno-religious pride: 'When young people see Islam put down they get angry and it creates a new interest [in the religion]. Our Islam promotes education for girls and boys. The programme said lots of things about Islam that aren't true'.

The stereotype of a 'Muslim woman' presented in 'Underclass in Purdah' did not match Kookab's own experiences growing up in Bradford. She was hoping to get the 'A' level grades to go on to university in either Coventry or Wolverhampton and study law. Indeed, Kookab explained that her father, a local taxi-driver originally from a village near Rawalpindi (Pakistan), was particularly proud when she achieved seven G.C.S.E.s, two more than her older brother. There was also a sense in which he now wanted to see her emulate the achievements of other young women in his extended family who had already gone to university. Kookab explained that her pioneering female cousins had improved her chances of studying away from home: 'They didn't mess around so there's no problem me going'. In fact, turning many a conventional assumption on its head, she considered that while 'a boy going to university is quite normal ... a girl going can be a matter of *izzat*'.

Kookab did not, however, suggest that her experiences could be generalized to include all the young women who studied at Carlton Bolling College. Unlike some of her girl-friends, she did not have

to occupy herself with domestic chores before settling down to home-work. This was also 'a pressure that boys don't get'. Moreover, she reminded me that coming to college at this time of year — the summer term — I would be speaking to a rather privileged group of mainly 'A' level students. Even though a large percentage of all young people now routinely stay on in further education beyond the age of sixteen, her impression was that perhaps twenty-five per cent of young Muslim women school-leavers did not either return to sixth-form or join another college. They remained at home.

In her discussion of these issues Kookab tended to operate a rather modernist and culturalist distinction between those families with a 'TP' ('typical Pakistani') or 'MP' (Mirpuri) view of the world and those, 'like my own family', emerging from 'traditional ways'. 'TPs', according to Kookab were to be recognized by 'the gaudy bright colours of their clothes and the fact they like that Hindi film music ... when you talk to someone from Mirpur they are shy about it; they answer in a mumble'. However, Kookab's own experiences did, on reflection, lead her to recognize 'TP' and 'MP' as 'throw-away lines like "sorted"'. The example of one of her friends from Mirpur, Azmat, had shown her that parental support for education is 'more complex than where you come from'. Indeed, Kookab had written an 'A' level Sociology project on the topic of Asian parents' attitudes to education. When I caught up with her friend Azmat, she told me that her ambition was to become a commercial pilot. She was retaking G.C.S.E.s at the time and intended to do 'A' levels the following year. She hoped to be going to London to study and said that it was likely her family would follow her there: 'We'll all move because they want me to go to university. Our relatives up here would gossip too much about the first girl to move away from home and study on her own. I can't even talk to a boy now, even innocently, without it getting back home'.

Kookab's 'TP' and 'MP' discourse, which dichotomized the burden of tradition and the benefits of modernity, was, not surprisingly, cross-cut by the observation from some in college that she and others were either 'too Westernized' or not sufficiently 'Muslim'. This was an ascribed categorization operated by both young men and young women in college. Kookab rejected such constructions of her identity, and while she admitted to a fear of gradually losing her competence in Panjabi, she identified herself most strongly in terms of being — 'Muslim ... then Pakistani, then Asian'. In the same way, her friend, Ayeesha, insisted that she was 'fully Muslim and Pakistani'. However, Ayeesha had a white mother and Pakistani father and one day she related to me how, earlier in the year, a group of what she categorized as 'TP' lads had labelled her a *gori* (white woman). Apparently, she was

abused in this way because of her cultural practices — she sometimes wore jeans — as much as her skin colour. While on the one hand she maintained that: 'They don't like the fact I'm so fair [of skin] — not a 'proper' Pakistani — and the way my parents give me more freedom than theirs. It's really sad. They think they're being authentic by saying women should behave in a certain way ... '. Ayeesha's immediate response to the insult was to produce another exclusion by way of retaliation. She racialized the 'TP' lads in question as 'black shits', a representation which — like the appellation *gori* — illuminates the way in which powerful constructions of gender and 'race' are routinely inter-dependent not mutually exclusive.

I eventually spoke to one of the young men allegedly involved in the '*gori* incident' when a group of students were chatting around a table one afternoon. He did indeed reproduce the notion that: 'the girls here are out of control. They don't wear *dupattas* (long scarves worn by women as a part of a baggy Panjabi *shalwar qamis* suit). They just put them in their bags when they come into school. That's why many parents still prefer village girls to come from Pakistan as brides. They don't behave like this lot', and for Fozia, another of Kookab's friends, this was too much. The fact that 'women have more freedom here' was precisely why she liked England more than Pakistan. Fozia argued that: 'It's different for lads there. Over there, if you [women] don't wear *dupatta*, they wonder what the fuck you're doing ... Asians only go back to Pakistan for funerals, land disputes and to marry off their daughters. You pack on Monday, arrive Tuesday, get engaged Wednesday, get married on Thursday and by Friday you've got three kids'. While two other young women, Nabila and Shirin, agreed with Fozia that girls are, as a rule, more constrained than boys, both here and in Pakistan, they were vehement in their protestations that you cannot judge 'arranged marriages' from what you hear in the media. 'We get really annoyed about the way Asians are portrayed. Many marriages are good and there's a lot more choice involved now'. Moreover, they recognized that Pakistan could not be stereotypically represented as the 'traditional' other of 'modern' cities like Bradford in England: 'Most of them here think that it's Pakistan that's backwards. But when Karachi Grammar school came on an exchange trip from Pakistan, all the girls were wearing short skirts. It was a real eye-opener for some of them'. However, on this occasion they could not pacify Fozia with their arguments. The debate continued.

The accusation that Kookab and her friends were 'too Westernized' did not only come from those whom she playfully referred to as 'TPs' and 'MPs' however. It also came from those who had discovered a very modern commitment to Islam as a form of activism through the work of organizations such as Young

Muslims U.K. (Y.M.).[20] Both Kookab and Fozia related to me the way in which an Islamic Society at the school had been established by two young men involved with Y.M. locally. They had lobbied for a ban on all music in the common-room on Friday lunch-times, the time when *juma* (communal) prayer is held in a small mosque across the road from the school. Anything from the 'grunge' of Nirvana to the latest Hindi film music was a constant sound-track during my discussions with students. On the matter of a ban some like Fozia had argued that, 'either way, the minority shouldn't have the opinion of the majority forced upon them'. However, as things turned out, most students supported the ban on music during *juma*. In fact the organizers had gone so far as to suggest that those who did not agree could not be 'good Muslims'. The question of why such support may have been forthcoming from students at Carlton Bolling College, when music was so popular in the common-room, is something I return to shortly.

A similar sort of 'Islamic' discourse was reflected in the boundaries made by some young 'Muslim' women in the sixth-form who had taken to wearing *hijab* (a veil which covers the hair and upper body) since becoming involved with Y.M. Tehminah, for example, a young woman of Mirpuri heritage who wanted to become a doctor, drew quite sharp distinctions between what she understood to be the kernel of Islamic 'religion' and the husk of Pakistani or Asian 'culture': 'you could say that those who wear *dupatta* and not *hijab* are more Asian than Muslim. Yeah, even the Sikhs wear *dupatta* 'cos their Asian too ... Muslim is an identity without all the trappings of Pakistani culture'. So taking the *hijab*, an Arab, and not a South Asian, mode of dress as their norm, Tehminah and others identified with what is popularly assumed to be 'global' and not 'local' in Islam.

Of course, while Tehminah was thinking globally she, necessarily, had to act locally and one issue in particular was occupying her when we spoke. She had liked a boy at another school for two years now but her friends around the table with us said that there could be no future in it. The matter of *qaum* (caste or tribe) was a further — seemingly more important — qualification of the fact that the boy in question was a Muslim, at least as far as her parents were concerned: 'They say we are a high caste, Rajputs, but he is Bainzi', she explained. However,

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[20] Young Muslims U.K. (Y.M.) are an organization firmly rooted within the accommodationist Islamist tradition of the Pakistani ideologue, Sayyid Mawdudi (d. 1979). The institutional instrument for his ideas, Jama'at-i Islami, was first reproduced in Britain under the name of U.K. Islamic Mission. However, in recent years Y.M. have created a distinct organizational and ideological space for themselves, reflecting their overwhelming concern with what they understand to be the spiritual malaise amongst Muslims born and bred in Britain.

appealing to the knowledge gained through participation in a Muslim sisters' discussion circle at a local community centre, Tehminah described how she had tried to teach her parents about the 'correct Islam' she now 'loved'. She had explained to them that, 'the fact he is a Muslim should be enough ... caste is against Islam. It says so in the holy *qur'an*'. However, her protestations had come to nothing. In fact, Tehminah, like Kookab with her talk of 'TPs' — and indeed Imran Khan cited in my introduction — drew upon modernist discourse about uneducated rural people's unfamiliarity with religious 'orthodoxy' in order to explain the discrepancy in opinion. She argued that her parents were, 'ignorant of true Islam ... they think what they do is Islam but it's not; that's just culture; they do what they've always done because they don't know any better'.

The discussion between Tehminah and her friends about her romantic possibilities soon turned to what she might do to favourably influence her predicament. Having failed to alter her circumstances with appeals to what she at least understood to be 'authentic' Islam, Tehminah was asked by Shazia, another of the young women studying for 'A' levels, 'Have you tried palm-reading or read your horoscopes in the paper? ... Do you believe in *ta'wiz*?'. A *ta'wiz* is an amulet consisting of a verse or verses of the *qur'an* which is worn around the neck. As a sacred charm of sorts, it is reputed to predispose the wearer to good luck and deter malevolent spirits or *jinn*. In response to Shazia's questioning, Tehminah tentatively enquired about the legitimacy of such practices for Muslims: 'They're not allowed are they? How can other things tell the future? Only God's supposed to know that'. The doubt in her voice was met by Shazia who retorted that she was in fact 'authorised to write *ta'wiz* from *pir* (sufi master) Mahroof', who lives locally. 'It's a privilege for our family', she explained. 'Some might call me superstitious', Shazia admitted, but there was general agreement among the young women — even Tehminah — that you can not argue with the evidence for the supernatural. 'Perhaps', Tehminah rather reluctantly agreed finally, 'I should go and see the *pir*'.

It would be wrong to dichotomize the experiences of young Muslim women like Tehminah and Kookab. While, as noted above, Kookab did not consider her family to be particularly religious, she told me that she had been impressed by her own sister's attempt to become more committed to her faith. Indeed, if she herself were to join one of the Muslim youth organizations active in the city, Kookab considered that her mum would just say, 'Good, keep it up'. The fact that it was a 'Muslim' organization would alone secure its legitimacy. As things stood however, Islam was most important to her family during times of crisis and life-cycle rituals such as birth, marriage and death.

What might be called this 'ethnic' experience of being Muslim was true for many of the young Muslim women I met in Carlton Bolling College. Most did not have the commitment of Tehminah. Indeed, pragmatic attitudes such as the following were more common:

In Islam women should cover their heads. I'm sinning talking to you [a male] now with no head covering. But things have changed. What can you do?

In *ramazan* (the Muslim month of fasting) you might stop dating; or there might be no kissing ... Muslims can not be perfect in this age. Too much has happened since the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him).

Nevertheless, when pressed, most students considered their 'transgressions' to be just that and not some form of 'feminist resistance' against a patriarchal religion. So why, when forced to take a position on issues constructed in terms of religious authenticity — such as the common-room ban on music — did most affirmatively position themselves in terms of Islam? Why were they not as 'vague' in their religious identifications as they were in their religious practices? I think the answer has something to do with the whole question of identity.

The accounts of young British-Asian-Muslim women presented here in this section do not, crucially, reproduce the contradictions that the 'between two cultures' literature has heaped upon them.[21] There is no suggestion that discrepant aspects of their wide-ranging experiences as Muslims — but also women, Asians, Britons and Bradfordians — do not blend together. Nevertheless, despite the emergence of a hybrid British-Asian-Muslim culture, it is the continued experience of racism and the representation of 'their' essential 'difference' from 'wider society' which begins to explain the strength of identification with Islam amongst many young Muslims in Britain. Islam is *the* symbolic language with which they represent their highest ideals. After all, what other indigenous ideologies actually speak to the experience of being young-British-Asian-Muslim?

This post-Rushdie generation has grown up with their 'difference' produced for them in state, media, academic and popular discourse. They are produced as 'in' Britain, but not 'of' Britain; members of an 'obscurantist' creed that supposedly threatens the most deeply held values of the 'enlightened' West.

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[21] See James L. Watson, ed. *Between two cultures* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977) 1–20. The name of Watson's edited collection, is problematically suggestive of a diasporic experience, especially for the children of first generation migrants, that is condemned to be caught in the confusing position of being neither one thing or another. In the volume there is therefore a general failure to interrogate a 'bounded' theory of culture as some*thing* discrete and received. Accordingly, Watson does not account for the everyday possibility of creative new fusions of culture or movement across what are routinely understood to be unified and undivided cultural systems.

Hence, Kookab's reaction to Panorama's 'Underclass in Purdah': 'When young people see Islam put down they get angry and it creates a new interest [in the religion]'. Indeed, while most agreed that Bradford was 'safe', Tehminah, for one, was worried about the experience of her co-religionists in Bosnia being generalized to all Muslims in the West: 'I'm afraid we [Muslims] might not be able to stay here. What would we do then? Where would we go?'. So the flip-side of young Muslims identification with Islam in contemporary Britain is an ambivalence about being 'fully British'.

In the final section of this paper I will attempt to make some theoretical sense of the discrepant representations of young-British-Asian-Muslim-women's experiences that I have documented above. Given my observations about the way in which 'being Muslim' would seem to be the subject position that many young people want to prioritize today, I pay particular attention to the different uses of that identification.

The uses of Tradition: Social Constructionism, Essentialism and the Polyvalency of Muslim Experience

In a recent paper Benson has argued that any politics of the margins grounded in an appeal to some form of authentic experience is deeply problematic: 'as feminism has discovered to its cost, a politics founded upon ideas of authenticity and non-negotiable identity can prove a serious liability, its loss in the context of ethnic minority politics might be no bad thing'.[22] Indeed, as I mentioned in my introduction with reference to 'Underclass in Purdah', the pervasive common-sense notion that all ethnic minority constituencies are in fact culturally bounded groups undivided by the differentials of experience is certainly problematic. Centrally, the fact that 'they' are defined in terms of 'their' essential difference from the 'norm' of 'a British way of life' problematizes their participation in the nation. Moreover, Yuval-Davis considers that the spaces that multi-cultural state policies have opened up for representation of the minority experience in Britain, have actually been dominated by those who most successfully deploy essentialist representations of cultural, and especially religious, 'authenticity'.[23] Thus, according to Yuval-Davis, unelected male leaders have been able to reproduce their 'fundamentalist' claims to authority within minority communities and, very often, with the legitimacy of state-funding behind them.

[22] Sue Benson, 'Asians have culture, West Indians have problems: discourses of race and ethnicity in and out of anthropology', *Culture, Identity and Politics*, eds Terrence Ranger, Yunas Samad and Ossie Stuart (Aldershot: Avebury, 1996), 55.

[23] Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Fundamentalism, multiculturalism and women in Britain', *'Race', culture and difference*, eds James Donald and Ali Rattansi (London: Sage Publications in association with the Open University, 1992), 278–91.

So it is then that an emphasis on 'race' and 'ethnicity' in state policy-making has marginalized the experiences of women and allowed too little space for representation of the ways in which subjectivities of gender, class and generation inter-sect with these other identities.

At the heart of such critical perspectives on the gendered implications of racializing and ethnicizing minorities in Britain is a commitment to what can be called 'social constructionism'. This term refers to the understanding that the grand narratives which have traditionally conveyed a degree of certainty regarding how we are all placed, one way or another, by identities such as religion, class, gender, 'race' and nation are in fact 'invented fictions'. Social constructionists deconstruct such fictions showing them to be made up of the contingencies of specific social and historical contexts and power relations. Indeed, they argue convincingly that it is only because such 'fictions' are hegemonic that they represent themselves as 'fixed' and 'inevitable'. As Gramsci reminds us, and the example of the young women at Carlton Bolling College shows, while such dominant discourses may attempt to erase the experiences of those who speak from the margins of society, hegemonic representations are never final, always unstable and routinely open to contestation.[24]

Unfortunately, one of the main problems with social constructionism is that although we may now be able to deconstruct the fictions of gender, 'race' and class, which together account for the main social divisions in late capitalist society, their efficacy can not be so easily dissolved. Moreover, it seems clear that the contestation — as well as the reproduction — of dominant relations is routinely grounded in appeals to some sort of authenticity. As Hall notes in his discussion of 'black' cultural politics: 'we can never conduct this kind of cultural politics without returning to the past but it is never a return of a direct and literal kind ... It is always retold, rediscovered, reinvented'.[25] However, as Benson's comments at the beginning of this section illustrate, many social constructionists would seem to have a problem with this sort of perspective. For example, the essay introducing the Women Against Fundamentalism (W.A.F.) volume, *Refusing holy orders* captures a sense of the uneasiness that the authors have regarding some women's involvement with religious organizations: 'one of the paradoxes described in this book is the fact that women collude, seek comfort and even at times gain a sense of

[24] For a recent examination of the significance of Gramsci's thought see Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci's relevance for the study of race and ethnicity', *Stuart Hall: critical dialogues in cultural studies*, eds D. Morely and K. Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 411–40.

[25] Stuart Hall, 'Old and new identities, old and new ethnicities', *Culture, globalization and the world-system*, ed. A.D. King (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 58.

empowerment within, the spaces allocated to them by "fundamentalist" movements'.[26]

In common with my ethnography in the previous section, what this short extract actually shows is that for at least some women, 'reinvented' 'authentic' accounts of their religious experiences are the most organic feminist tools that they have to 'think' alternatives with.[27] Indeed Ali, also writing in the W.A.F. volume, relates one of the trends that I document in my ethnography: the way in which revivalist 'Islamic' discourse is providing some young Muslim women with a way to 'break in to' and interrupt what they perceive as their parents 'cultural' — and therefore un-Islamic — approach to issues such as 'arranged marriages'.[28]

It should also be noted that young Muslim women who choose to prioritize their Islamic identity above all others can also view themselves as a part of a much broader — indeed global — social movement.[29] Indeed, their experiences are continually being refreshed through local participation in a global circulation of ideas facilitated by modern communications technology such as the Internet. Much has also been written lately about the way in which Muslim women have struggled to recover and redeploy Islamic discourse to equalitarian ends, in the same way that Western feminists have reclaimed and valorized women's lives from the past to inform experiences now. As Rippin notes: 'Most writings by Muslim women on Islam ... emphasize that the problem is, in fact not a religious one; religion is the answer not the problem'.[30]

One of the authors that Rippin refers to is Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist and feminist theologian. She has argued that: 'if women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite. The elite faction is trying to convince us that their egotistic, highly subjective, and mediocre view of culture and society has a sacred basis'.[31] However, Mernissi's feminist politics does not simply target the interests of men. Her critique of representations which produce Islam as uniquely oppressive of

[26] G. Saghal and N. Yuval-Davis (eds) *Refusing holy orders* (London: Virago, 1992), 9.

[27] See also A. Shaw, *A Pakistani community in Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988). Shaw recognizes that young Muslim women can use revivalist religious ideology to legitimate their desire for a career.

[28] Yasmin Ali, 'Muslim women and the politics of ethnicity and culture in Northern England', *Refusing holy orders*, eds Gita Saghal and Nira Yuval-Davis (London: Virago, 1992), 101–23.

[29] For an account of the trans-national dimensions of Islam see my paper, 'In the name of the *umma*: globalisation, 'race' relations and Muslim identity politics in Bradford', *Political participation and identities of Muslims in non-Muslim states*, eds W.A.R. Shadid and P.S. van Koningsveld (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1996), 206–28.

[30] A. Rippin, *Muslims, their religious beliefs and practices. Volume 2: the contemporary period* (London: Routledge, 1993), 122.

[31] F. Mernissi, *Women and Islam* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), ix.

women also strikes at the heart of contemporary debates about the way in which the West has continued its project of modernization and universalization in the post-colonial period: 'Islam alone is condemned by many Westerners as blocking the way to women's rights. And yet, though neither Christianity or Judaism played an important role in promoting equality of the sexes, millions of Jewish and Christian women today enjoy a dual privilege — full human rights on the one hand and access to an inspirational religious tradition on the other.[32] The 'route' that she takes towards a feminist identity politics is therefore very firmly 'rooted' in the language and symbols of Islam's rival claims to universality: 'We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights ... stems from no imported Western values but is a true part of the Muslim tradition'.[33]

The main thrust of my argument here is that, whether hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, all representations of experience create silences and as such are subject to discrepancies and open to contestation. Islam, just like any other culture or religion, is a symbolic meaning system which provides a polyvalent set of symbols with which Muslims legitimate all sorts of projects, both oppressive and resistive. Kabbani's 'contradictory' responses to the 'two tyrannies' of the Ayatollah Khomeini's death threat and the West's slander against Islam during the Rushdie Affair of 1989 illustrates this point nicely: 'I am an unashamed champion of my culture, but I am by no means a defender of the many abuses that are committed in the name of Islam. I recognise that there are evident weaknesses and blemishes in Muslim countries, but in this book I have tried to describe what for me is an immensely positive heritage'.[34]

To underline my perspective on these issues I want finally to give some consideration to the work of Fuss who I think can be of some help in moving beyond the essentialism / constructionism dichotomy.[35] She focuses on the variety of uses of essentialism in different types of feminist discourse, arguing, in short, that there is 'no essence to essentialism'.[36] Fuss considers that 'social constructionists do not definitively escape the pull of essentialism', indeed, that 'essentialism subtends the very idea of constructionism'.[37] Eventually, she arrives at the notion of 'strategic' essentialism in order to describe the way in which essentialism may have some interventionary value in specific

[32] F. Mernissi, *Women and Islam* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), vi.

[33] Ibid., viii.

[34] R. Kabbani, *A letter to Christendom* (London: Virago, 1989), x.

[35] D. Fuss, *Essentially speaking: feminism, nature and difference* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989).

[36] Ibid., xii.

[37] Ibid., 5.

contexts.[38] It is worthwhile quoting Fuss at some length. She considers: 'that the political investments of the sign of 'essence' are predicated on the subject's complex positioning in a particular social field, and that the appraisal of this investment depends not on any interior values intrinsic to the sign itself but rather on the shifting and determinative discursive relations which produced it ... the radicality or conservatism of essentialism depends, to a significant degree, on who is utilizing it, how it is deployed, and where its effects are concentrated'.[39] And again that: 'perhaps the most dangerous problem for anti-essentialists is to see the category of essence as 'always already' knowable ... To insist that essentialism is always and everywhere reactionary is, for the constructionist, to buy into essentialism in the very act of making the charge; it is to act as if essentialism has an essence'.[40]

Fuss's reflections help to draw together my overall concerns in this paper. There are perhaps two salient points that I want to re-state by way of conclusion. The first is that Islam cannot be seen as a grand narrative which straightforwardly positions all Muslims in a particular way, even if, in general terms, the experience of men has become hegemonic over women. Rather, 'being Muslim' is qualified, as my ethnography has shown, by people's diverse experiences as women and men, but also as migrants and students, Asians and Britons, Yorkshire Tykes and Mirpuris. Indeed, such an emphasis on the variety of young British-Asian-Muslim-womens' subjectivities is important because it begins to interrogate a pervasive 'Islamophobia' in contemporary Britain, something that the Panorama programme 'Underclass in Purdah' did nothing to contest. As the recent document from The Runnymede Trust argues, the religion of Muslims is seen by wider society as uniquely monolithic, threatening and sexist.[41] However, my respondents at Carlton Bolling College experienced Islam as a set of discourses and practices which could be deployed both hegemonically, in an attempt to control and discipline young women, and counter-hegemonically, so as to legitimate their concerns about issues such as higher education and marriage.

While there are certain advantages to deconstructing Islam and conceptualizing it as a diverse and contested set of representations, my second point is that the contingency of all experience means that we must all speak from somewhere. To give voice to one dimension of experience necessarily leaves any number of other

[38] D. Fuss, *Essentially speaking: feminism, nature and difference* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 20.

[39] Ibid., 20.

[40] Ibid., 21.

[41] The Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia.*

subjectivities silent. Therefore 'speaking from experience' is very much a matter of prioritization. Why then did so many of the young women I spoke to in Bradford prioritize the language and symbols of Islam at this moment in history? My argument has been that the potential of Islam as a vehicle for young Muslim women's resistance to exclusion must be understood in terms of their double marginalization at the local-global periphery of both multiracist Britain and the universalizing modernity of the West. I would not, of course, want to valorize the experience of 'being Muslim' at the expense of Muslim women's other subjectivities. Nevertheless, young British-Asian-Muslim women today — despite the diversity of their experiences — do routinely consider themselves to be a part of the same 'community' that was first inspired by the revelation of God through his Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century C.E. This shared set of symbolic religious beliefs and practices facilitates an imagined continuity of experience through time and across space. Therefore the diversity of Islam is perhaps best conveyed not by the notion of *islams*, as some have suggested, but rather by the plural meanings that differently positioned historical and social subjects have attributed to a common, authoritative set of symbols and language for nearly fourteen-hundred years.[42]

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[42] For an exploration of the utility of the pluralised term *islams* see A.H. El-Zein, 'Beyond ideology and theology: the search for the anthropology of Islam', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 6 (1977), 227–54.