

Understanding Muslims in Britain: events, aftermaths, atmospheres

Interpretación de los musulmanes en Gran Bretaña: acontecimientos, repercusiones, atmósferas discursivas

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Abstract

Muslims have come to occupy a central role in discussions about citizenship and belonging in the UK. A cursory glance at the context surrounding this development reveals the importance of critical events in which Muslims are imbricated, and which help shape the discursive ground upon which Muslims/Islam are understood. This paper charts a number of critical events, beginning with the Rushdie Affair in 1989 through to the recent “war on terror” to consider how certain tropes emanate from these, and how through the workings of media and policy-making these gather velocity over time to pronounce themselves in an atmosphere, against and within which Muslim life should be apprehended.

Keywords: Critical Events, Representation, Recognition, Ethnicity, Atmosphere

Resumen

Los musulmanes han pasado a ocupar un lugar central en los debates sobre ciudadanía y pertenencia en el Reino Unido. Este artículo analiza una serie de acontecimientos críticos que les implican y contribuyen a conformar el terreno discursivo sobre los musulmanes y el Islam, desde el caso Rushdie en 1989 hasta la reciente “guerra contra el terror”, para mostrar cómo dan lugar a ciertos tropos y cómo, a través de los medios de comunicación y de la formulación de políticas, éstos cobran impulso con el tiempo para pronunciarse en una atmósfera discursiva en el seno de la cual es aprehendida la vida musulmana.

Palabras clave: Acontecimientos críticos, Representación, Reconocimiento, Etnicidad, Atmósfera

Introduction

Data from the Census 2021 showed that in the UK, 3.9 million people identified as Muslim. This represents 6.5% of the total population – up from 2.7m in 2011 or 4.9% of the UK’s population. There was more to be gleaned about the diversified demography in terms of: ethnicity, gender, age, as well as topography and spatial location of Britain’s second largest religious grouping. What became poignant, however, was the immediate press attention to the upward trend in numbers of Muslims. This was juxtaposed with a decline in the number of people who identified as Christian – now 46.2%, down from 59.3% in the 2011 census. This 13% drop in the number of people identifying as Christian achieved significance *in light of* a less than 2% rise in the number of Muslims, whom we were again reminded were part of the fastest growing religion¹.

This uneasy juxtaposition was symptomatic of an already discernible trend in representations of Muslims in the UK and Europe more broadly, where the figure of the Muslim has been mobilised in the formation of narratives of loss. While various debates ensued, some of them touching on the erosions of national character and identity represented by the decline in numbers of the majority religion in the UK, the simultaneous focus on rising numbers of Muslims was seen as unremarkable in the light of certain constants. Commentators pointed out that the persistence of poverty and discrimination² – despite the change in measurables since 2011 – have the effect of

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/nov/29/leicester-and-birmingham-are-uk-first-minority-majority-cities-census-reveals> [Access: 05.01.2024].

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/30/census-says-39-of-muslims-live-in-most-deprived-areas-of-england-and-wales> [Access: 05.01.2024].

shaping dynamics such as socio-economic status, geographic location, political representation, and participation that *actually* connote the British Muslim citizenship experience.

In this article I consider "critical events" which accompany the presence of Muslims in Britain, and how these events reveal or give way to certain tropes through which popular understandings about Muslims then emerge. While much academic and popular attention to Muslims has tended to fixate on such critical events, I employ an expanded heuristic, whereby I consider how each trope resonates with the moment of its emergence to then give succour to frames for understanding and studying Muslims; reflected in policy attention and media effect that can be gleaned from that time. Importantly, the tropes identified can be seen to gather velocity over time, evident in their periodic convergence in the figure of the Muslim as normative outsider. These in turn, I argue, gather momentum through affecting sensibilities, and become pronounced as an atmosphere within and against which Muslim life should actually be apprehended.

While the atmosphere foregrounds particular structures and processes that help shape the discursive and material ground upon which Muslims can be read (Cante et al., 2023), it also underscores the unfinished nature of social relations in cities and nations and the unsettled nature of these too. Such that, it becomes important to understand that the study of Islam and Muslims continues to be mired by Orientalism (Said, 1978, 1981), and an epistemological approach that sees Muslims through a positivist lens as essentialist and Islam as an unchanging system. It therefore becomes easy to silo or contain Muslims and Islam within categories and timeframes in relation to political events (Arkoun, 2003). Here I consider a consequence of this, namely how critical events when taken together and not considered discreetly offer a way of understanding the Muslim experience over time and as a processual phenomenon.

Muslims into the mix – religious identity and the evolving landscape of diversity

In Britain today, Muslim communities reflect the Muslim global populous in microcosm. The tapestry of Muslims in Britain has formed over almost a century as a result of migrations propelled by a range of global events. Salient among these is the arrival of peoples from Britain's ex-colonies resulting in the presence of largely South Asians, but also significant numbers of Yemenis who settled around port cities and metropolitan centres to help meet the need for labour in the post-war period (Ansari, 2003; Hamid, 2011). A series of Nationality and Immigration Acts as well as Race Relations legislation contributed to the regularisation and public visibility of minority ethnic groups in the national imaginary.

Historically, Muslims were largely invisible as a social or political category in the public and policy attention to minority ethnic groups in Britain, instead being identified and categorised within broader framings of black or Asian. The religion of such diasporic groups was often understood as an aspect of ethnic traditions and culture carried over

from “back home”. Early literature on Muslims in Britain examined how, as immigrants, Muslims continued to practice their religion, viewed as one aspect of their identities brought over from South Asian rural areas (Dahya, 1974; Shaw, 2000). This folding of religion into culture and ethnicity – and later pronounced through connotations with place – could also be considered a carry-over of Orientalist imaginings, where representations epitomised difference and danger while also conveying intrigue and obscurity (Hussain, 2014, 2015). It is no surprise then, that Muslims along with other postcolonial people, might come to be “ironic citizens” (Sayyid, 2006) being positioned uneasily and ambiguously in the national imaginary of former colonial states.

The first “critical event” that changed the way Islam and Muslims manifested in public life is considered to be the “Rushdie affair” in 1989. Following the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, Muslims were catapulted into the public eye. Media and public attention at the time served to valorise an impression of South Asian men burning books in street protests, set against an urban backdrop of post-industrial decline that would become iconic in representations of Muslims and national belonging. This event played into a newly emerging Muslimness as both indicative of a relationship with God, but also as a significant aspect of public identity (Malik, 2012). The aftermath of *The Satanic Verses* affair, in particular the religious sanction given by Ayatollah Khomeini in the form of a fatwa, served to unite *Sunni* and *Shi’i* Muslims but also solidified a new phase of public presence which, for the first time, was led by religion as opposed to ethnicity or other social determinants such as employment or education status. These latter categories would provide important variables to help delineate a distinct Muslim social position in the UK over the following decades as Muslims became more visible in the public sphere (Modood, 1990).

It is important to note that the emergence of the figure of the Muslim on the public stage, also coincided with fragmentation of the category *black* that earlier represented a unifying political category of experience for racialised groups in the UK, marking a shift in thinking about power and multiplicity. The splintering of experiences of difference marked the era of “new ethnicities” in which scholars engaged anew through ethnographic studies and postcolonial analysis to explore shifting contours of cultural production and political engagement among ethnic minorities in the UK, noting the fluid and *becoming* nature of identities while acknowledging that these were fraught through regulation of different kinds of experience (Alexander, 2004a). With a renewed focus on previously neglected subject positions such as gender and youth as well as new sites of engagement like neighbourhoods and expressive cultures, understandings of minority ethnic identity and “community” were expanded and shown to be complex, messy and undetermined. Yet, the figure of the Muslim would remain mired in discussions that characterised the adoption of religion as regressive and backward, and not symptomatic of a splintering of identities and categories of difference that would form part of multiculturalism.

This could be attributed to the globality or foreignness that is an integral part of Muslim identity and which enabled Muslims to be read in terms of happenings around the globe and other places and times. For example, following the Rushdie Affair in 1989, the emergence of Muslims and Islam as politicised phenomena on the global stage became pronounced in the rise of the “Green Menace” (Esposito, 1994). Other events coterminous with this moment included the first Iraq war and the Bosnian war in 1992,

which enlisted Muslim passions and sympathies toward the *Ummah* alongside disillusionment with British foreign policy (Hamid, 2011). This called into account (young) Muslims' belonging to the UK resulting in the image of troubled young South Asian Muslim youth (Alexander, 1998) – a semblance of the "between two cultures" thesis that pervaded earlier discussions about minority ethnic youth in the UK – and marked the development of pathological discourses about the heirs to Islam as young, troubled Muslims in the midst of mostly peaceful South Asian immigrant communities (Ousley, 2001; Amin, 2003; Alexander, 2004b). In popular and political discourses this provided justification that disillusioned South Asian Muslims had become estranged from their ethnicities and communities and were, therefore, susceptible to the world of *fundamentalist* religion.

In such narratives, there is repudiation of immigrant traditions and the appropriation of Islam in a radical form, which goes alongside discourses of a generational clash that academics have argued take place within British and Western European Muslim communities. Furthermore, there is an allusion of a shift in authority (Lewis, 2007) expressed in the desire to see the transmission of an unchanged Islam across generations in their perspectives about the "frustration with Inherited forms of Islam" (Jones, 2012: 137) and "religion and culture mixed up". There have been studies that highlight Muslim settlement at significant points, showcasing the establishment of settlement patterns and infrastructure such as mosques (Gale, 2009) which represent and institutionalise new forms of identity signalling a shift from ethnicity to religion. While such formal Muslim organisations denote or come to represent Islam as a religion (Metcalf, 1996), mosques, however, also represent the struggles, divisions and diversities that accompany ethnic communities, which allows us to see the types of politics that Muslims are involved in and who they are (Keith, 2013). The diversity of space both locally and globally that is utilised in Muslim settlement also gives rise to new ways of negotiating ethnic and gender roles (Mohammad, 2011). Thus, cultural exchanges occur within public spaces beyond mosques where distinctions of ethnicity and culture fade into the background (Bhimji, 2009; Hussain, 2022).

Subsequently, there is an association of a defined "Muslim cultural identity" in geographical locales such as Bradford in Yorkshire that is understood as the site for anti-racist struggles and the politicisation of the figure of the Muslim as well as organisations that are established. Quite often, Muslim youth find a space between competing and appropriating symbols caught between different cultural, socio-economic and political domains. Vertovec (1998) and Samad (2010), writing about youth in Bradford, suggested that alternative forms of identity emerge from pressures of exclusion from the state and from limiting modes of "community" particularly among emerging generations of young Muslims. New identity positions for Bradford Muslim youth are also highlighted in terms of their experimenting with music as a means of expression of self when faced with othering factors such as the "war on terror" (Swedenburg, 2010). Speaking about Muslim cultural production, in relation to the HipHop band Fun-da-mental, Hutnyk argues this "[...] exceeds art and cultural industry conventions to be part of lifestyle and politics" (Hutnyk, 2006: 26). For others, however, suggesting that British-born Muslims are placed in a better position to somehow "purify" religion from culture and tradition attests to an Orientalist version of modernity versus tradition and that the "West is best" (Sayyid, 2009). It is possible to see, then, how the figure of the Muslim emerges at a time

of global flux but also national unease toward identity and belonging in the UK expressed as a result of diversification of culture and ethnicity.

Into the 21st Century – new climates, old terrains

It was predominantly middle-class South Asian men who, after the Rushdie Affair of 1989, found themselves in the public sphere and became the conduit for engaging with government on behalf of Britain's Muslims through formation of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). A decade later, however, the pre-existing tropes of Muslim men protesting in public spheres would receive further momentum in the form of unruly Muslim youth embroiled in "riots" in northern mill towns.

The northern riots of 2001 began as local conflicts between white "native" residents and largely second-generation British South Asians in areas of sizeable minority ethnic settlement around greater Manchester. Tensions between residents soon developed into violence and spread across the north of England into Bradford, Leeds and Burnley, all areas with significant proportions of South Asian residents. The clashes were prompted by racial attacks on Asian communities and the failure of the police to provide protection from this threat. Whilst the urban disturbances featured mainly South Asian communities, they were to be read as a continuation of urban violence which punctuated race relations in the UK since the 1960s and the riots that took place in Nottingham, Brixton, Toxteth, Handsworth, Brixton and Tottenham (Farrar, 2009). The riots caused major uproar and were soon at the forefront of national and international media. A number of explanations for the riots emerged including a focus on race relations, right-wing sentiment, and actions coupled with police complicity and racialised prejudices (Bagguley and Hussain, 2008). The northern riots provided further impetus to the notion of the "dangerous Asian male" narrative – a social perception and trope that would haunt the demographic for years to come. A culture of unashamed questioning of the cultural practices and national allegiances of British Muslims emerged.

Schooling was also a contributing factor and played into discourses about "deservingness", which ultimately exposed further schisms between Muslims and mainstream society. For example, perceptions emerged that Asian segregated schools were formed due to parental choices, which then allowed white parents to send their children to majority-white schools in different areas. This led to a generation of whites and South Asians growing up separately and mutual distrust festered. Local press also portrayed Asians in a criminalised manner, depictions which gave way to the idea that the segregation of communities was a choice made by Asians – "self-segregation". Subsequently, young South Asians became the focus of increased police attention, which would later bleed into a more militarised and security focused agenda.

Given the ineffectiveness of public services such as education, health and housing, minority ethnic groups sought to establish alternative provision or supplementary services which meant competing for public sector funding. Public funding was perceived to be spent on empty community consultation exercises and on projects that were of

little benefit to communities. Established approaches to teaching culture in schools were proving to be unsuccessful, whereby Asian "culture" taught to white-majority schools through education reform policies was ultimately deemed superficial and, conversely, white working-class communities were perceived as having no culture. In this climate, white parents began to complain of favouritism towards Asians in the classroom feeding resentment that would come to inform identitarian politics (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000).

The new cultural relativism that emerged, whereby white communities perceived themselves as disadvantaged in relation to ethnic minorities, was part of a wider current of intolerance in the UK towards immigrants drummed up by the electoral gains of the far right in Europe, centre-right media and Home Office vilification of asylum seekers and the government's tough pronouncements on the rights and duties of immigrants. It was against this backdrop that in the summer of 2001, young South Asians living in the rundown textile mill towns of northern England took to the streets to protest against economic deprivation and hopelessness, the rising threat of white nationalism and violence, police intrusion and incursion, public-sector neglect and failed ethnic leadership. The complexities that lay behind the images of rebellion – fires, stones, smashed windows, attacks, lootings, swearing, shouting – shocked a nation used to seeing Asians as a placid people. Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities who had provided cheap labour in northern UK mill towns which allowed industries to survive in the face of growing international competition in the textile industry were now made scapegoats in narratives of loss. The decline of manufacturing industries led to hand-to-mouth work for South Asian communities and the emergence of new sectors that were predominantly minority ethnic owned and run such as taxis and restaurants (Kalra, 2000).

In this context, ethnic resentment among minority ethnic communities was seen to be fuelled by deprivation and desperation. Kundnani (2001) quoted in Amin (2003) suggested that: "the textile industry was the common thread binding the White and Asian working class into a single social fabric. But with its collapse, each community was forced to turn inwards on to itself" (Kundnani, 2001: 106). The accompanying public narratives helped to further pathologise Muslim masculinities; not only did they stand up to the white majority but also to the ethnic politics of their own community leaders. This provides a cultural complexity to the rioters of 2001; these young Asian men grew up mixing eastern and western markers of identity through language, music and consumer habits where "their acts were the claims of full British subjects, without qualification and freed from the politics of community and consensus practices by their community leaders" (Amin, 2003: 462).

Ironically, a more expanded heuristic for understanding Muslimness is available in the experience of women, which in other contexts and times has attracted similar pathologised attention as the experiences of Muslim men. Differing mostly in attribution of agency whereby Muslim men are seen to possess and exercise excessive energy, Muslim women have been characterised as subjugated and lacking in ability to exercise agency. UK policy (specifically in the field of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism) has typically perceived women as an intrinsically peaceful (McDonald, 2012) and moderating group (Brown, 2008), useful for the dissemination of cultural values (Allen and Guru, 2012) aimed at "civilising" British Islam (Brown, 2008). More recent empirical research, however, suggests that, through their participation and resistance, some

Muslim women are able to exploit attempts to engage and “empower” their demographic to cultivate creative relationships within the policy space that can essentially subvert contentious and stigmatising policies (Pearson, 2020; Qureshi, 2021). In her study of Muslim women’s mobilisation within social movements in response to the “war on terror”, Narzanin Massoumi (2015) similarly found that activists drew upon female Muslim agency to challenge the trope of the oppressed female figure, though highlighted challenges associated with this practice as actors “simultaneously refused and relied upon dominant terms of the debate about Muslim women” (Massoumi, 2015: 715).

Some studies on Muslim women have attended to deeper structures and engagements (rather than essentialised frameworks) which inform motivations as well as cultural and cosmopolitan perspectives, for example as hijab wearers to illuminate alternative reasons for wearing the hijab (Dwyer, 1999, 2000). Women have shown to be able to navigate between upholding traditional social life as well as venturing on new paths and thereby able to sustain Islam as an indication of difference (Tarlo, 2007, 2010; Göle, 2006; Herding, 2013). This also links to the rise of the “hijabi blogger” phenomenon and the emergence of Muslim female agency and self-identity within digital spheres. Where once Muslim women were misunderstood as submissive, uneducated and repressed, Muslim women in the twenty-first century in the West have reclaimed the narrative surrounding their identity, largely through social-media and digital expressions (Mora, 2022).

The Muslim association with female agency for Göle (2006) is a process of “banalisation” that gives rise to novel ideas about modernity and the meaning of the public sphere. For Göle, the hijab connotes a “dramatisation of difference” (Göle, 2006: 26); where there is an emerging moment to conjoin urban landscapes, engage in public discourse, reflect on women’s positions and roles, acknowledge individualisation and secularism – which are all in contrast to the idea of the radical or alienated Muslim. Thus, the racialised experience for Muslim women is displaced through the celebration of different styles for hijab wearing women (Tarlo, 2007, 2010; Herding, 2013) that allow stereotypes to be challenged by young assertive Muslim women. Yet while Islamic artefacts, such as the hijab, allow for a platform for women to become involved in international fashion houses and an outlet for expression through styles of wearing and patterns, such women at the same time also become hyper-sexualised symbols of Muslimness. Thus, the image of the Muslim – particularly the Muslim woman – moves between the extremes of pathology and exoticism. This is apparent in discussions involving Muslim women that still focus on themes such as “arranged marriages”, the hijab and veiling as central points of study. As Ahmed (Ahmed et al., 2003: 45) argues, this limits dialogue on British Muslims and their families.

Conversely, as Takhar (2004) argues, Islam becomes centrally important for the South Asian woman’s struggle for equality and freedom and this is increasingly becoming visible. It allows a framework from which women can overcome oppression and gain rights. Thus, religious loyalties are used to contextualise religious orthodoxies and argue for equality within a religious context. At the same time, it is crucial to bear in mind that whilst there may be common themes running concurrently for Muslim women, they are not a homogenous group and different women will narrate their stories differently (Aston et al., 2007: 105).

Hussain and Bagguley's (2007) study on South Asian women in higher education emphasises how female attendance at university has changed. Parents are encouraging their daughters to successfully obtain a degree and it is this support which is empowering for Muslim women. The figure of the immigrant Muslim woman, then, exemplifies a change in socio-religious status, which has strengthened roles in familial as well as communal lives. Crucially, it has been by promoting gender equality that is sourced from Islamic authority which has helped such women form this position. This stance has increasingly been supported by second generation women, who were born, raised and educated in Britain and who demand similar rights in terms of education, professions and religious learning as their male counterparts (Wardana, 2013: 59). Yet, a more heterodox account of Muslim masculinities has not been available. As Alexander (2000) has noted, pathologies around South Asian masculinities commonly expressed in the form of "the gang", do not allow for "happy" or "celebratory" accounts that include friendships or community (Alexander, 2000: 222), thereby, illuminating different ways Muslim agency is expressed (Alexander, 2024). Although there is now present within South Asian communities the idea of the "BrAsian" (Sayyid, 2006) or "British Muslims" (Hamid, 2011: 249), which points to hybrid and syncretic modes of Muslim subjectivity in Britain.

Recognition and policy making

Alongside increased public interest in the figure of the Muslim and Islam as a foreign religion, has been the emergence of civil society groups such as the MCB who have been at the forefront of lobbying campaigns for inclusion of Muslims in public policy (Sherif, 2011). Established formally in 1997, the MCB has existed in various formats and has worked in advocacy for Muslims in Britain. Since the 1980s, it has supported local "community" struggles – with schooling being a key and early example (Ally, 1983). The MCB received recognition by the New Labour government in 1997. At that time there was an acceptance of multiculturalism in public policy, while also a sense of embarrassment and regret following the Macpherson Report, which for the first time revealed institutional racism in public sector institutions. Identity politics was then a way for Muslims to enter the political discourse and gain recognition in Britain.

The 2001 Census proved an interesting point for the Muslim figure. This was the juncture at which the figure of the Muslim emerged as an "analytical category" (Beckford et al., 2006: 8), enabling Muslims as a population to be better represented in official statistics. Religion had already been recognised in academic and policy discussions as a factor that went hand in hand with ethnicity, giving rise to a distinctive Muslim reality (Modood, 1997: 10). A lot of this understanding was used in the lobbying campaign in 2001, which included the question of religion, as well as for future censuses (Hussain and Sherif, 2014).

Following the 2011 Census, the MCB sponsored another effort to make Muslims more visible in terms of their demographic profile as well as their position in relation to discourses of citizenship. This built on information that had been gathered from previous censuses. The exercise established a report which was published online in

January 2015. It looked at wider factors such as inequalities, the labour market and civic engagement; categories related to family life, educational attainment and housing remained prevalent. The outcome of this second online report showed that the world had changed for Muslims; the MCB was now one of many interlocutors for Muslims with the government and Muslims were now present in the landscape of broader political and social issues. Although this data gave rise to information on ways to improve services to meet Muslim needs, it also revealed concerns in relation to Muslim representation and hostility in the public sphere (Hussain and Sherif, 2014). Critics had argued that despite such lobbying, current Race Relations legislation still did not include religion as a protected characteristic alongside ethnicity, “race” or national origin which were unlawful to discriminate against (Ameli and Merali, 2004: 58). Faith, however, did become a protected characteristic in the 2006 Racial and Religious Hatred Act (Wardana, 2013: 60-61).

A key fault line that exposed the vulnerability of Muslims was that of education. A survey by the Islamic Human Rights Commission on British Muslim Expectations (Ameli and Merali, 2004) found that out of 1,125 Muslims surveyed, 47.5% preferred to send their children to a Muslim school instead of a state school. Similarly, religious values were a concern for 40% of the sample as their children were growing up and only 8.5% opted for mainstream education. 8.5% of the sample chose the best school available, regardless of whether it was a Muslim school or not (ibid.: 32). Many Muslim parents were also motivated in their desire for Muslim schools because of the state of mainstream education system, which they saw as failing minority communities through poor academic performance. Education, then, was a key site in the formation of Muslim consciousness (Meer, 2010, 2012), where religious and faith schools were chosen as sites for the inculcation of values that converged with those in the Muslim home (Ameli and Merali, 2004: 9-10).

The “war on terror”

The late eighties and nineties were critical junctures, then, in the emergence and consolidation of British Muslim communities. From the shift in socio-religious life brought about by migration from the former colonies to the (re)claiming of religious agency animated by responses to the Rushdie Affair. These events also led to the alignment and exploration of concepts such as *Ummah* and religious and social loyalty and belonging catalysed by the socio-political background of the Bosnian war and of British foreign policy in relation to the first Gulf War. Later the northern riots, interlinked with debates on the “death of multiculturalism”, rising right-wing activism and increased policing, contributed to the cementing of tropes such as that of the “angry Asian male” – pointing to how the British Muslim community had become the site of complexity and diversity in relation to its sense of self.

Further critical events that impacted Muslims in both the British and global context were those commonly known as 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London. Following these, the figure of the Muslim – already subject to considerable national scrutiny in media, policy and politics – was catapulted again into the spotlight, this time associated with terrorist

violence. This was in no small part due to media coverage of the events and the fact that the attackers were identified as Muslims. While British Muslims had already navigated a complex journey in contemporary Britain, the dawn of the twenty-first century would become a period of incredibly heightened controversy, suspicion and Islamophobia (Jackson, 2018) that would carry forth until the present.

The aftermath of the "war on terror" has led to Muslims becoming subject to biopolitical control and governmental scrutiny arising from a concern with "homegrown terror" (Kundnani, 2009; Nickels et al., 2009; Kapoor, Kalra and Rhodes, 2013). Subsequently, public and policy attention has fixated on Islam as a faith that does not sit comfortably with(in) the modern world. An all-encompassing frame has emerged that incorporates the figure of the Muslim, Islam (the religion) and organisations that are believed to foster strong ties between the Muslim world and Muslims in the UK. Transnational Muslim organisations that Jones (2012, 2013) discusses, for instance, are distinct from the more established institutions discussed in earlier anthropological studies, but at the same time are mainstream in the sense that they attract media coverage and public funding. Moreover, the majority of these institutions emerged after 9/11 and 7/7, moments when the government focused on "de-radicalisation" and put forth programmes such as Prevent. What emerges then is the impression that Muslimness is a distinct experience, severed from associations with early or existing organisations – for example, those associated with ethnic "community".

Key examples include Abu Hamza of Finsbury Park Mosque and Al Muhajiroun who are seen to symbolise a sense of detachment from recognisable (i.e. South Asian inflected) Islam of earlier generations who migrated to Britain. Boubekour (2007) asserts that in the face of claiming an alternative Islamic identity, Muslim agency becomes responsible especially in the allegations that have haunted Muslims since 9/11: "[...] an Islamic culture of prestige whose codes need to be mastered – codes largely secularized and based on the aesthetic norms of the West, on its liberalism, and on its efficiency and competitive-ness" (Boubekour, 2007: 79).

Alongside the negative attention assigned to Muslims since the spectacular events that heralded in the "war on terror", Muslims have expressed concern over negative representations and connotations of themselves and Islam in the media where images and discourses tend to gravitate towards negativity and hostility (Poole and Richardson, 2006). For example, fundamentalism comes to be seen as a problem inherent to Muslims, and Islamophobia becomes a diversion from the state's failure to acknowledge socio-economic marginalisation. Edward Said's earlier work is a good example of how representations of Islam presented in the media are mostly negative, where "the West is radically at odds and this tension establishes a framework radically limiting knowledge of Islam" (Said, 1981: 163). This resonates in the contemporary era in, for example, the furore surrounding the Danish cartoons (Saeed, 2007).

A significant aspect, then, of the Muslim experience since the "war on terror" has been the heightened media and public attention on Islam and Muslims, wherein anti-Muslim sentiment has impinged on inclusion into mainstream British society (Wardana, 2013: 34). An expression of the social exclusion faced by many Muslim communities is the rise of anti-Muslim hate crimes. Githens-Mazer and Lambert in 2010 found that many of the hate crimes carried out on Muslims were not reported to the police as there was a lack

of confidence in authorities being able to remedy these, as well as a perceived uninterest by the police. The report's authors suggested that the frequency of hate crimes targeting Muslims is far higher than those officially documented.

In the mid-2000s, amidst the global "war on terror" and its community and policy-level consequences for Muslims, it became clear that Muslims in Britain and their education would also be affected and called further into question. The controversial suggestions of former foreign secretary, John Reid, for Muslim parents to effectively spy on their children due to their supposed vulnerability to grooming for terrorist activities, was just one example of the politicisation of Muslim education and personal life, in Britain (Abbas, 2018). A politicisation which occurred across the world for Muslims, particularly so in the West. Muslims were seen not only as a faith community but also a homogeneous community, judged as a whole, as a potential threat to state security – and later, Britishness itself.

The themes of suspicion and threat culminated in the controversial Trojan Horse scandal in 2014 in which a handful of Muslim majority schools with Muslim staff were suspected of disseminating and promoting terrorist sentiments to British Muslim students (Shackle, 2017). The Trojan Horse affair was born out of a letter that was leaked to Birmingham City Council claiming an Islamist "takeover" of Muslim-majority public schools in the city by teaching staff and parents within the schools themselves. After several reports initiated at a governmental and independent level, the letter was understood to have been a hoax. However, it raised further questions in the public imagination about Muslim belonging in the UK. Miah (2017) in his book entitled *Muslims, Schooling and Security: Trojan Horse, Prevent and Racial Politics* discusses the broader ramifications of the Trojan Horse scandal and what it meant, and continues to mean, for Muslims in Britain and the politicisation of the figure of the Muslim. For Miah, it was an important instance of the "racial politics of the media", which helped reinforce an image of Muslims as a fifth column in Britain. The aftermath of the Trojan Horse affair continues to reverberate in debates around terrorism exemplified in the case of Shamima Begum where the state has been criticised for its exceptionalist stance in its revoking of her citizenship.

The vulnerability of Muslims as citizens in a world hostile to them and gripped by the so called "war on terror", is underscored by the recent case of Shamima Begum, a fifteen-year-old British-Bangladeshi school girl who, in 2015, left the UK and travelled to Syria to join the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL) after being influenced by extremist rhetoric online. Although the case of Begum is an interesting and complex one, at the time of writing she remains stateless as she continues to appeal to be allowed into the UK after deciding to leave ISIL. Begum's case is particularly disturbing due to her age at the time of her entry into ISIL and the ease with which she was influenced at a young age, all via online mediums. The case sparked outrage amongst the British public and internationally, particularly in 2019 when Begum's appeal to return to the UK was denied. When the British government countered her appeal by seeking to send her to Bangladesh because of her ethnic affiliation, Bangladesh refused to accept her, because despite of her Bangladeshi ethnicity, she had no citizenship connection to the state. Begum has, therefore, remained in Northern Syria as a stateless citizen. The case of her stripping of citizenship has caused much debate at governmental, media and community levels, providing another example of the turbulent relationship British Muslims have had

with Britishness, identity and the ever-changing contemporary context within which they navigate their faith and sense of self.

Between state and locality

Whilst policy addressing minority communities and Muslims can be characterised as emanating from the level of the state, Britain’s race relations policy experience is one of tension between national objectives and local perspectives, with measures often being significantly mediated at local level. For this reason, the concept of “policy enactment” – how ground-level practitioners understand and mediate such policies – is highly relevant to British multiculturalist experience; evident in controversies over the direction of race relations policy following the 2001 riots in northern towns and the increasing and exceptional attention on Muslims in anti-terror legislation that has been the hallmark of state-Muslims relations since.

The parallel lives discourse was a very localised phenomenon which sparked national level debate about “sleepwalking into segregation” and ultimately triggered the death of multiculturalism discourse. Importantly, the move away from multiculturalism meant that any support for locally driven policies targeting minority ethnic communities and cultures – whether to redress inequalities or promote cultural difference – not only disappeared but were replaced by a centrally driven programme to target extremism, and whose sole constituency has been Muslims who have morphed into a “suspect community” (Nickels et al., 2009).

The importance of locality for policy to address the “Muslim problem” is best observed in the allocation of resources and the spotlight given to radicalisation and extremism. The Prevent programme, arguably the most blatant targeting of a particular minority group under the guise of tackling extremism, has always been administered at a city (and later also regional) level. In 2015, the government launched a refreshed version in the city of Birmingham where the PM repeated the vision of a “one nation” government³.

With the increasing centralisation of tackling extremism policy and practice, there has also been a loosening of “responsibilisation” (Thomas, 2017). The early iterations of Prevent, before it became part of the security apparatus of the state, enjoyed community involvement in the “active citizens” mould. Indeed, the anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiment that had gathered pace post 9/11 and 7/7 had made being Muslim a problematic and distressing enterprise with many Muslims feeling powerless to affect change against what was obviously a global issue (Devji, 2005). Thus, many Muslims became involved in the early Pathfinder phases of Prevent in some cases continuing traditional community and youth work.

³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/david-cameron-extremism-speech-read-the-transcript-in-full-10401948.html> [Access: 23.03.2022].

The coalition government of 2010 was credited with finishing off “community cohesion” funding and moved toward reintroducing integration, falling back on the old tropes of language competency and expectations on Muslims to abandon traditional mores. With this, values become the new site of struggle; reflected in the move from violent extremism to just extremism, and Fundamental British Values. Again, this has played out at local level, where it is possible to discern a simultaneous celebration of multiculturalism that can also be folded into lament about consequences of this for the nation; reflected in discussions about Fundamental British Values (Hussain and Meer, 2018).

Pejorative reporting of Muslims and growing Islamophobia are highlighted as pivotal factors in the reception of Muslim community engagement through mechanisms of security and counter-terror. Research confirms that Muslims are often depicted as a threat to the British way of life and that Islam and the West are still embattled in a clash of civilisations (Mamdani, 2003). This, coupled with a gross increase in hate crime (Chakraborti and Zempi, 2015), results in reduced confidence in the state which is considered to negatively impact the willingness of Muslim communities to accept, support or engage with counter-terror work as they are simultaneously deemed as a “risky” and “at risk” population (Heath-Kelly, 2012). These types of grievances are not uncommon, and the government has been urged to respond to them by fostering safe spaces for discussion and not rendering contentious topics off limits (Briggs et al., 2006). A concern in the current climate, however, is that the overhanging presence of Prevent in classrooms, hospitals and other statutory agencies will drive questions and vulnerabilities underground and that the statutory nature of Prevent is in fact closing off spaces and discussions that might prove crucial for people from vulnerable backgrounds (Ahmed, 2020; Younis, 2022).

As well as responding to diversity within communities and recognising the heterogeneity of Britain’s Muslims, the government has been urged to engage anew with faith-based identities and increase engagement with groups like Salafis who have traditionally been left out of discussions because of their literalist interpretation of Islam (Briggs et al., 2006). Their stylised visage of long robes and face veils and much of their interpretative and worship practices have been interpreted as non-normative, yet Salafis have been found to be apolitical and complimentary to counterterrorism efforts of local authorities (Hussain, 2022; Pilkington and Hussain, 2022). As Anabel Inge (2017) found through her ethnographic work with Salafi women in Birmingham and Brixton in the UK, rather than being victims of a fanatical form of Islam, the niqab-wearers she encountered were educated, empowered and often converts to the religion who adhere to Salafism’s literalist teachings out of rational choice. Understanding differences within Muslim communities is critical for the success of community-based counterterrorism and indeed for the ongoing engagement of the state with its Muslim demographic in a broader sense. Assuming homogeneity among British Muslims has “hampered engagement and led politicians on many occasions to make deeply alienating choices about ‘representation’” (Briggs et al., 2006: 60). Many of the Muslims that Briggs et al. spoke to in 2006 were frustrated that the government did not endeavour to reach fringe groups or go beyond representing familiar individuals and organisations. They also highlighted the need for government, and particularly agencies like the police, to develop better relations with Muslim communities that are unrelated to security or

terrorism. It is still imperative that community infrastructures are strengthened, policy-making processes are made more transparent, and meaningful engagement is achieved if communities continue to be placed at the centre of counterterrorism policing and counternarrative work (in terms of community-based approaches to counterterrorism) and that similar processes are adopted for broader forms of Muslim/state engagement for those pockets of communities that choose not to participate in counter-extremism endeavours. Though the UK's counterterrorism project Prevent has long been criticised as a punitive tool for the pathologising of Britain's Muslim communities (Kundnani, 2009), it must be acknowledged that Muslim individuals, groups and civil society organisations have historically engaged with the agenda, and continue to do so, for myriad reasons (as touched upon above in attempts made to subvert policy through the exercising of female Muslim agency).

Conclusion

That the study of Islam and Muslims in the West has largely been dictated by political events has given way to an epistemological approach that favours classical metaphysics and certain ways of thinking about Islam and Muslims (Arkoun, 2003), which has also been the hallmark of earlier social science attention on minority ethnic groups who arrived as postcolonial immigrants to the UK. The tendency in the accompanying academic literature has been to reduce or deduce groups to concepts in the social sciences such as migration, ethnic minority and citizenship. An example is how Muslims in public are deduced from earlier iterations of ethnic or racial groups.

I have noted that the figure of the Muslim has received increasing attention in academic and popular attention since the Rushdie Affair in 1989. Through charting subsequent critical events it is possible to discern an emergent atmosphere that pervades discussion about the nation, and its minorities more broadly, positioning Muslims as exceptional citizens. This is fed by media and policy attention, which invoke tropes that are part of the aftermath of public attention on Muslims and Islam. These include concerns around masculinity, violence, law and order, and more recently securitisation and violent extremism, which increasingly shape how Muslims and Islam have come to be characterised in the public imagination.

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