

## **In Search of My Mother's Garden: Reflections on Migration, Sexuality and Muslim Identity**

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### **Introduction**

*In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* is Alice Walker's 1983 collection of essays and reminiscences, in which she focuses on her intellectual and personal journey as a feminist, writer and, as she puts it, womanist:

Womanist, as she defines it, means many things: first, most definitely, 'a black feminist or feminist of colour'... 'wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one'. Second, 'a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as the natural counterbalance to laughter), and women's strength.'

A womanist also loves; 'Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

(1983: xi-xii)

Following somewhat erratically in her footsteps, I offer a few reflections on issues of migration, gender, sexuality and identity. The impetus for this paper was a public lecture delivered in 2005 on women's history, in which I used my autobiographical narrative to think about questions of gender and sexuality in the context of Muslim identity (1). Since then, I have thought more directly about my location as a gay man in provoking the initial choice and formation of topic. In re-visiting this history with a keener sense of my queerness, I therefore weave a different narrative from the initial talk, but a central thread remains the topic of women in my family and the wider community of Bengalis and Muslims that I am connected to.

This alerts you to that fact that aspects of this narrative are a history once removed and, therefore, whilst these aspects are indeed part of my autobiography, I cannot claim any 'truth' for them except as *my* standpoint on gendered experiences and identities. I mention this at the outset because it is important to say that I am not speaking for women,

even – *particularly* – those in my family. How could I? Ontologically and experientially I do not share their existence, their social constitution or their social histories – I am an educationally and materially privileged, British born Bengali male, one who is both physically and culturally absent from most of the everyday aspects of the women’s lives I discuss. Rather, my aim is to explore how my narrative, delivered from my standpoint as a gay man, is inextricable from the lived experiences and political dimensions of gendered Muslim identity: how queerness is inevitably defined in relation to gender norms and their disruptions but how these norms are also ones of culture and ethnicity. I am not simply a gay man, but a gay British Bengali, irreducibly racialized in my queerness and thus occupying an intersectional location in terms of gender, race, class and sexuality (2). My hope is that I can usefully explore this queer intersectionality to understand its dimensions and also whether it can contribute to untangling some of the contemporary controversies of Muslim ‘difference’.

Even though I identify with many of Walker’s criteria, I will leave you in judgment on my womanish credentials but if, as Walker states, ‘womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender’ then I will be content if by the end of the paper, I have come across at the very least, as a little pink...(if that is indeed the color of ‘queer’...).

### **History, Narratives and Narrators**

My assumption is that history, by definition, only exists in the present. By this statement, I remind myself that narratives, particularly autobiographical ones such as mine, are constructions in the present, even as they seek to reconstruct the past. While the methods of narrative are varied, they have in common a reliance on subjective sources, whether that is memory, personal visual or written documents, or the extended, in-depth interview. This qualitative approach is in fact the inevitable option when attempting to understand personalized stories, but it just as inevitably throws up questions of epistemology, ontology and authenticity by placing the narrator at centre of our methodological nexus. The act of telling the tale is in full measure constitutive of the tale that is told: it is a crucial part of those interactions around telling ‘stories’ (Plummer 1995).

And so we need to know something about the narrators of history to assess to what extent their stories, their narrative constructions, are governed by their present social locations and motivations. Hitherto, I have tried to be honest about my position as a socially privileged and largely Westernized male, removed from the everyday life of my family. Moreover, the most Western aspect of my character – or so Bengalis and Muslims would have you believe – is my homosexuality. Momin means ‘believer’ and ‘faithful one’ in terms of the Islamic religion, and a homosexual identity is certainly a breach of this faith, regarded as a sin - moreover, one that we can choose not to commit. I have chosen that sin, chosen to come out and live as a gay man, an identity that has pushed me away from a Bengali and Muslim community both geographically and culturally, whilst simultaneously – in common with most homosexuals who ‘escape’ their localized culture – it has provoked a constant awareness of gender conformity and non-conformity amongst that culture.

Part of that awareness has been that the women in Bengali culture carry much of the burden of cultural integrity, although I am loathe to accept that as a purely ‘Eastern’ phenomenon (3). In many everyday ways, this means that they also carry the burden of history, of the changes brought about by migration, political events and discourses and the cycles of the economy. My failure to be a ‘faithful’ Bengali male has allowed me space to reflect on these issues of gender division, what it is to be a man or woman, but it has also forced me to reflect upon the privileges of masculinity within culture and how I still receive some of them, despite moving away from the culture, and, perhaps worst of all, having chosen to be gay.

But the truth is that I have never focused directly on these issues in my academic work, despite the fact that my work is largely about sexuality and gender. Literally too close to home? Perhaps, but also partly because I failed to inhabit an assumed academic identity by failing to engage with issues of ethnicity, even in my work on sexuality and democratic politics which only briefly touches upon the complications of assuming a universal ‘gay’ identity (2000). What changed was a change of academic location for a

while – a semester as a visiting lecturer in a Women’s Studies program at the University of Maine – where they invited me to do the annual Women’s History lecture, thus provoking a more disciplined reflection upon issues which had been circulating for a while. The first telling of the tale was not reflexive about epistemology or content. This second telling of the tale has constituted the narrative differently because I am trying to be more reflexive about the knowledge I produce through my narrative, and how that knowledge is fundamentally governed by intertwined neglected narratives, and thus intersecting explanations of oppressions and ontology. The skills an academic training has given me have been used to reflect upon the personal; my existence as a gay man, the oppressions I felt within that identity, how and why gender politics and divisions create controversies of sexual difference and above all, what it means to be Muslim, gay, and Muslim *and* gay.

Epistemological consequences occupy and exercise me precisely because the ontological is what I am at heart attempting to understand. A relativist epistemology is by definition the basis of autobiographical narrative methodologies and I am secure in those implications, but I am aware as well that they raise uncertainties, ambiguities about claims to authenticity and perhaps validity. For example, I am removed from the early experiences of migration simply because I wasn’t born until my family had been in Britain for some time. As a narrator, I am therefore dependent upon the oral histories provided within the family – mostly, it has to be said, by my mother and eldest sister. And so another dimension of standpoints becomes involved which requires attention to the relationship between me, as narrator, and the memories I deploy of others’ memories and how they serve the authenticity I am trying to access, or construct. In this sense, this narrative is not autobiography but auto/biography, a term introduced by the feminist theorist Liz Stanley ‘to contaminate the idea that a narrative produced by a self writing about itself, and one produced by a self writing about another being, were *formally* distinguishable from each other’ (Broughton, 2000: 242). Whilst the deployment of memories in the narrative that follows is an attempt by me to perform some kind of audit of the self (Stanley 2000) of my ontological dimensions, it is also an auto/biography of

the Muslim women I know, and how my thinking and writing about gender determines my thinking about sexuality.

Broughton goes on to discuss how feminist interventions in this genre have shown that writing biographies of self and other have often masked the social location and epistemology of the writer; something I hope I am making visible. However, in my uncertainty about these questions of epistemology and authenticity, I think that I can only claim that I am producing a ‘queer’ narrative, one that acknowledges and embraces the uncertainties of identity categories and explores how I am located within, against and outside these categories as historical and political phenomena. While there are different dimensions to queer theory, I am focused on its challenges to ontological foundations, challenges made to universal categories of gender and sexuality, which often deployed within feminist and gay movements and ideas (4). As Seidman argues in his review of queer theory, it has contributed to the elaboration of those ‘disenchanted’ ideas that propose that the ‘subject’ is an unstable and arbitrary construction, forged out of multiple and historically contingent intersections of ways of thinking about self-identity (1996: 11-12). I am proposing that you understand this story as a queer narrative precisely because that framework allows for the uncertainty the narrative displays and thus shows an affinity with the intersectionality that I am reaching for. In presenting this history, I am made aware that it is a story of intersectionality and how that intersectionality renders me queer – there are never quite solid or definite identifications with Muslim, Bengali, or gay identity – a history of deferred ontology. Perhaps histories are never the whole story about the past, but they are often much of the story about where we are in the present.

### **Migration**

And the present day is somewhat amazing to me – here I am, the son of first generation immigrants, inhabiting a position of social and economic privilege as an academic, having used that profession to migrate recently myself, from the UK to Canada (5).

Unfortunately, I am an exceptional case, in that Bengalis are still very near the bottom of the socio-economic heap in Britain, despite four generations of presence (6). Like many others, my family emigrated to the United Kingdom, or rather, East London, back in the

1950's, from Bangladesh. Monica Ali's 2003 first novel, *Brick Lane*, is named for the area in East London which became home to many Bengalis, congregating together as immigrants sensibly do, for the security of knowing that there are others around you, like you, who may give you work and housing and, indeed, treat you as fully human.

The family lived in this area before I was born, but we still have relatives there and indeed, the area is now called not only Aldgate, but also Banglatown, in recognition of the now well-established Bengali community and culture. However, my particular Indians moved west. Of course, not very far west, given the narrowness of England's waistline, but far enough to live in a community in Bristol, a town which was ready for the spice of Indian cooking – or so my parents' generation hoped. And there they still reside, having been there for almost 40 years, now in a well established community with three Mosques, wonderful grocers and butchers, and so-so tailors, but not widespread economic or educational success.

Migration is of course a rich story and it has many different dimensions, both positive and negative histories intertwined. My interest here is to think through migration as a movement through identities. Who traveled, and what were their identities, and what did we and me become by living within and against those identities? You see, in truth, although we describe ourselves as Bengali, my parents were born in India, and more properly under the colonial rule of British India. Partition occurred in 1947 and although Nehru – the first Prime Minister of India – eloquently described the moment as the partial fulfillment of 'a tryst with destiny', it turned out to be a bloody and wrenching event, creating two states – India and Pakistan – allocated along majority religious identification. Muslim Pakistan consisted of Pakistan as we know it today – that burden on the left shoulder of India – and East Pakistan, a geographically separate landmass, which became the independent state of Bangladesh in 1971 after a war of independence from Pakistan.

So, although we are now officially Bangladeshi in British audits, that State-derived identity did not exist until the early 70s. We have always been self-identified as Bengali –

relating to the region in Northeast India that is a wider expanse than the state of Bangladesh. My Bengali father was born and raised in Calcutta, the former colonial capital of India and still an important city, but now officially in India. And it was my father who came to Britain first, working in and running restaurants, going home occasionally to East Pakistan, and my mother arrived only after the first few years, with my eldest sister in tow. My brother was born here, 8 years after my sister. By the time I was born, trips 'home' were to Bangladesh, although I went only once in my life, when I was around 4, and will probably never go again; home, for me, is the West, and now, living in Canada, more specifically Britain.

Migration is of course about journeying. But it is not enough to understand it as simply journeying from one land to another. Post-colonial migration is definitively about journeying through time – traveling from third worlds to first involves not only a change of economies but also a change of culture – how societies and labor are organized and how that impacts upon the possibilities of cultural practice and identity. If, as we sociologists like to claim, the ascendance of the West has been defined by all that is modern, migrating to the West has meant traveling into the future, from rural, agricultural and most of all, traditional, lives, to a system of wage labor, commodities, and smaller kinship networks. This traveling through time is a migration into structures of modernity, both economic and bureaucratic. And, as Stanley (2000) reminds us, the bureaucratic imperative to modernity creates the need to account for our selves, through official audits of self. We travel into the future, and our selves are remolded, reimagined in this future-present.

My family's engagement with such structures is defined both through economic location – as with many from the sub-continent – work was the aim, over and above the welfare available – but such work is low skilled, low paid and often, in the catering and service trades where many Bengalis end up, subject to wider economic factors that determine disposable incomes. But for the generations that followed, the welfare state in its various forms provided the hope of a springboard out of this situation: from maternity and infant care through the NHS, through primary and secondary education through the local state,

through the benefits system, from public housing provision and supporting and supplementing incomes. What a litany of socialized provision! It used to be called social security. But state, or rather collective, provisions are now much less secure than they were, and regarded suspiciously in our political discourses of taxation and public provision, as they have been since the fiscal crises of Western capitalist states in the late 1970's. But I guess the point is that these bureaucracies, at a general level and well as individualized ones, created identities, or at least defined them to large extent, both negatively – the immigrants scrounging off the welfare state, and taking 'Western' jobs – and positively; perhaps they also created personalized routes for the self, identities now wedded to welfare provision, social housing, income support, all in support of low wage jobs (with low expectations of moving out of such socio-economic sectors) but security in the social provision so fundamentally absent in our countries of origin. Such fundamental changes in the way that lives are structured, represented and lived cannot help but impact upon the way in which those lives are inhabited.

### **Identities**

During this journey through modernity, my family have always identified as Bengali. Thus, whilst migration is a journey through time, that journey is undertaken within and against categories of identity. I do not think that any of us were ever actually Bangladeshi citizens since, by 1971-72, those of us who were already around were all subjects of the Crown – as British citizenship is charmingly defined. But were we ever really British? Not, I would think, in any full measure – it took until 1997 for British Muslim to become an official identity – in the sense that our head of state mentioned the British Muslim as a new and welcome part of British Identity on a trip to Pakistan and India. Forty years after my father first arrived!

There is little point in rehearsing the specifics of legal racism – how Britishness has been defined in opposition to particular ethnic identities. Suffice to say that while we may now see British South Asians as indeed British, and while we see curry as something of a national dish, British political and popular culture has agonized its way through the process of understanding and accepting difference. Indeed, we have the irony now of a

political discourse that criticizes British multi-culturalism from the centre left (from whence it came...), long after multi-culturalism has become embedded to everyday life in many cities and towns across the UK. What seems to underlie such anxieties are more traditional concerns of social integration, social order and social inequalities, but in accepting differences, we seem to have lost sight of how to articulate that some difference still can be mapped accurately onto social inequalities. Ghettos are not just ethnic, cultural choices to separate, but have historically been the way to survive economically.

They may be a feature of urban British life, but the inequalities and separation they signify are not caused by those that inhabit these spaces. And separation from the wider populace is also, seen from the 'other' perspective, a logical social reaction to a lack of provision, and a lack of acceptance of differences. But of course, the crucial issue now is how these spaces also have become mini-cultures of their own (as if in practice multi-culturalism could mean anything else), particularly in relation to Muslim identities and the practices that these communities engage in. It is also not a wild claim to say that now – less than ten years after its emergence into the discourse of Britishness – the British Muslim is a vilified character. I am sure I don't even have to iterate the spiraling descent of this discursive transformation but think of the horror at the 7/7 bombers being British and of the recent controversies around women wearing the veil in Western societies, exemplified in Britain (7).

My experience of this identity is governed by my own semi-detached attitude to identification as a British Muslim. I have never been comfortable with that explicitly religious identification, although certainly these days it is used to define and characterize a culture even though many within that group are divided by national identities such as Pakistani and Bangladeshi. My own memories of growing up in Bristol also mark out an identity defined more by culture than by religion. Furthermore, although we were different in many ways – the food we ate at home, the language we spoke, and of course, our skin – we were also largely westernized, going to school, learning English as our first language, playing with the other kids on the street and in each other's homes. My only

concerns around identity would have been whether I was going to be Starsky or Hutch in playground re-enactments. Not so, I think for my parents' generation. They were of course concerned for us to do well in school, although they themselves had neither the experience nor the cultural resources to participate much in helping with either our homework or parent-teacher relationships. However, they were also concerned to make us aware of our ethnic culture, and in particular, my memories evoke my mother taking on this responsibility.

Needless to say, as a student I was a failure – neither motivated nor respectful of the need to learn the written Bengali language, or to speak Bengali consistently at home. And my imagination of the future had no particular direction, but was certainly not working in restaurants or running a shop, which seemed to be all that the Bengali men did. But I was pretty much left alone, a second son having nowhere near the expectations of a first, and regardless, not expected to carry the burden of family respectability as the girls were. As I grew older – I hesitate to say matured – I could, and did, cut my hair into the required buzz cut, stay out late, even drank with my friends, all in that void of parental half-knowledge and denial.

But I also became aware of the divisions between genders, divisions mostly of different types of labor, domestic labor, emotional labor and the labor of responsibility. Identities, sociologically speaking, are two-fold: they are both the self-representation we choose to adopt, inhabit and mould, and cultural historical categories that are assigned to us.

Although it is right to distinguish 'identities' from the traditional sociological concept of 'roles' precisely because they signify a self-description first and foremost, they do not exist solely as interiority. Identities do not simply come from or exist simply within, they are a social resource, dependent on the possibilities of politics, culture and time and, in the very act of declaration, they become part of these social possibilities. And the current possibilities of Muslim identity are not positive ones; particularly in Britain, it seems that there has been a remarkably quick shift from embrace to abjection. If identities are historically specific, they must also change through time, particularly as we inhabit them and as the possibilities of history affect us. History, it seems to me, has moved in

opposite directions when it comes to Muslims, particularly in relation to women's identity.

And this is interesting to me because my own identity, as gay and Bengali has also pushed and pulled me, shattering any expectations of linear progression I had towards liberation, towards integration, towards the secular equality that democracy promises. Rather, in the current political climate, it has rendered me unable to exist comfortably as 'Western', when I had thought all along that as a gay man, I could not exist as Bengali, as Muslim.

### **Gender**

The idea that circulates in the west is that Muslim identity is inherently repressive for women. The debates on the veil over the last few years can be understood in this way since one element of this discourse is that the veil represents patriarchal control, both within the marriage and wider community. From Susan Moller Okin's query 'is multiculturalism bad for women?' (1999), to the deployment of the 'imperiled Muslim woman' in justifications for the War on Terror (Razack 2008), we have seen a steady iteration of women's freedom and equality with Western 'values'. Certainly, through most of my young adulthood, I thought the same, although in truth I am not sure I could articulate that as Muslim as opposed to Bengali – women were the barometers of cultural practice, and they were always two steps behind men in their freedoms. That is how I saw it, and I felt conversely distanced from the expectations of masculinity – providing, marrying, having children, being tough, stoic, leading (or controlling?) the women. I identified with the emotional openness of women, with the domestic labor they performed, with their abilities and duties to keep life going, by providing, managing, raising the children and, most of all, as we grew to adolescence, struggling to communicate, struggling to understand the very different lives we led or tried to lead, as teenaged and westernized, but still Bengali, still part of our culture.

In preparing the original talk in 2005 I tried to think through some issues that had been evident to me for some time but are absolutely refracted through my development of an

intellectual career focused on sexuality and the inequalities of sexual identities. Being a PhD student supervised by the materialist heterosexual feminist Stevi Jackson gave me enormous time and guidance to read and absorb the theories that linked institutionalized heterosexuality with the stigma and oppression of homosexuality. The vast wealth of academic literatures in this area, and producing my own research contributions, have helped me to make sense of my youthful identification with women, with women's writing such as Walker's and with the lives I saw being led in my family; how not wanting to become a 'real' man may have led me towards homosexuality. However, there has been a change in how the women I know identify, and that has affected my sense of identity, suggesting to me that my youthful self-definition against the Bengali/Muslim identity was too simplistic and remained unrefined during my initial intellectual career when I was focused much more on how *I* was oppressed. Let me now talk through some of the reasons for these shifts.

First, gender is a social division – it is relational and depends absolutely on the notion that we have two groups, which are defined through an exploitative relationship. Even as I saw the oppressions for Bengali women, I derived much freedom from being a Bengali man. I had fled the constraints of that culture – or so I liked to think – but I did so by taking the freedoms I could expend as a man. Furthermore, as most feminisms have always understood, woman is not a unitary or universal experience, and it is similarly important to understand that masculinity is not monolithic, but is divided through class and ethnicity, and men have to become men, as women are compelled to become women. Thus, men have the same impetus to inhabit the identity – the same power of expectation operates, although of course, the routes to masculinity largely depend on the exploitation of women. Beauvoir was correct to say that one is not born a woman (1949), the point was to focus on how culture compelled women into femininity. In Bengali culture, it seems to me that women could not but become women – there was no other choice, but I had thought less about what happens when men fail to become men. What happens when structures of globalised capitalism and racism deny routes of advancement to whole ethnic groups of men? How does their power in relation to women become affected?

Was I wrong to reject the whole culture and religion? – certainly it has constraints and responsibilities – but these are of gender and culture, not of religion, or rather, religion often becomes the post-hoc rationalization of existing cultural norms. And these seem to be changing. Women in my family now have expectations of women’s rights, of women’s access to education, jobs, and independence, and this occurs from within the cultural framework of being both Bengali and Muslim. Is this the benign influence of the West, or is it the sensible adaptation to resources and opportunities that were not there before the politics of feminism? For example, in common with many other ethnic groups and whites, boys are doing less well adapting to the new post-industrial nexus of education/employment. While they hang tough, speaking hip-hoplish about BMWs, bitches and bling, the girls drive past them in both achievement and expectations.

Do women inhabit the power of identity differently – are women better, because they have always had to be, at resistance? Creatively merging slivers of power to accelerate their lives beyond the apparent limits of ‘femininity’? For the women in my family, across generations, the possibilities were seemingly contradictory – I do recall the identities of the 70 and 80s, and they were, by and large in terms of our extended family identities, western adoptive, perhaps not completely assimilative, but certainly freer in the sense of there being less traditional constraints for women, and encouragement to explore and mix in the new culture – indeed, there was little alternative since communities were not strong enough in number or voice to create much more than social gatherings at houses and restaurants. My mother smoked – how terribly modern – and she dressed in western clothes as well as traditional saris, she often went out with us socially, but she always had the dinner ready as well. My sisters went out, but more circumspectly.

I failed to become a man, a proper Bengali man, in the most fundamental way possible. But in fact, I had privileges over the other men, the other boys of my age; a private school scholarship education and eventually university; an overwhelmingly white, English and Scots world when I experienced it but one where I could fit in relatively easily, having learned the middle class liberal codes, knowledges and cultures at my private school and absorbing them more at university. In the absence of wanting to be a real Bengali man, it

was possible for me to become gay, not to choose homosexuality in some casual performative way, but to live in a culture that had begun to provide space for association and the recognition of existence. But the existence is a totalizing identity – not just a sexual preference, so, although I am sure I was not born a homosexual, I certainly had no choice but to become one. Although homo-sex exists in Bengali culture, it does not exist as a social identity, one which individuals can identify with and inhabit. Moving across culture, space and most of all, through time – a journey from a pre-modern world to one about to enter post-modernity has had consequences for my family and for me, allowing me to become something they could not have imagined as Bengali.

Those who migrate do so in search of a better life, particularly for economic opportunity, but mostly for security, not to deny indigenous or established settlers their own means of getting by. But they did not bargain for the world to change as much as it has in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for fiscal crises in Western states heralding the withdrawal of the state from social provision, from the routes to success through education being affected so much by this issue. And of course, culture has gone from being, literally, black and white, to bursting out in full colour, – multi-culturalism exists not simply as a political goal, but as everyday lived experience. Concurrently, gay culture has emerged in the West, as have public debates and expectations of women's equality. Whilst they may welcome the latter, as I see women doing in Bengali culture, they must resent the former – that identity that I embody – easily, or lazily, understood as the corruption of the West.

I cannot imagine how different this world must seem for those of my mother's generation, those from pre-modernity, but neither am I seduced by the notion that the journey through modern time is linear, or, put it another way, that the advent of difference is simply liberal democratic progress in its inevitable motion so that we will, eventually, all just 'get along'. Along with the explosion of sexual and ethnic and racial difference has come the inevitable normalizations within those communities – establishing and practicing their cultural norms in more institutionalized ways. The advent of settled secure Bengali communities, with generations of families, links with institutions such as councils and police, and the money to help fund Mosques, extra

schooling in the Koran and Arabic, and a stronger political identification as Muslims can but inevitably produce greater challenges to other differences that have been establishing themselves during this same period – most pertinently gay culture.

I saw this change – this active present normalization of ‘tradition’ in my own family and the wider community in Bristol, both of Bengalis and, in my later home town of Glasgow, within the Pakistani community there. Women look different, wearing less Western clothing and more traditional Eastern attire, covering their heads more, and are less prone to wearing saris as well. It seems that these communities, my family, have become much more Muslim. Some of my aunts would not have their photos taken at my brother’s wedding a couple of years back – a very traditional Muslim idea that only Allah, should create the human image. My nieces learn Arabic and they are forbidden junk food treats – once my main method of bribery. Are all those women I looked up to, all those women who helped me, even when I became the ultimate other, are they all now Muslim, over and above being Bengali?

### **My mother’s garden**

It would be easy to say that this Islamification occurred due to 9/11. But that is not quite true. While it is true that the searing heat of that murderous act has burned Muslim identity powerfully into Western consciousness, the consequences for Muslims globally are nuanced to the political context in which they live. Thus, in Britain, while many of the women I know see the War on Terror as a cultural and literal war on Islam and the poor who make up the majority of Muslims worldwide, they also understand it as a continuation of the decades old racism around immigration in the UK. Furthermore, those that I know see their Muslim dress and identity as a positive point of resistance to such discourses – as in so many histories of turning the screw – instead of obliteration, the result is stronger, more confident identification. Moreover, the economic and cultural establishment of Muslim institutions pre-dates the terrorism of 9/11 – it is more accurate to think of the transformation into Muslim identity as an inevitable outcome of time and immigrant integration – this is of course the established and now expected path of immigrants in the West.

The consequences of integration, of multi-culturalism are numerous and increasingly difficult, generating controversies of difference between majority/minority and minority/minority communities. One such debate is about state-funded religious education in Britain. Do we deny money based on the separation of church and state and the underlying concerns about the institutionalized schooling of gender divisions? Or do we accept that institutionalized racism within the state system has failed specific ethnic communities, such as Bengalis? Some see the establishment of Muslim schools as a way of guaranteeing educational success, for boys and girls, a haven from the commercialization and sexualization of childhood within Western capitalist culture, a place where the rigidity of religion can be used to achieve the investment of a good education.

I find myself uncertain on such issues, conflicted by my Western liberal secularist instincts and my knowledge that I am the only member of my wider family to make it to college level education, and that was largely due to a private, although publicly funded, high school education. Conflicted by my childhood experience of the culture as expecting less public achievement of women and my knowledge that now, the expectations of girls is that they will and should achieve, both educationally and in work – perhaps this just makes them more like Western women with the famous double burden to achieve good jobs and skills and also to keep their female cultural identity and integrity intact. But the expectations and sense of entitlement is good – my youngest niece recently announced that she wanted to be class president, but would have to wait until she got to a school that had such, dare I say, American, structures. And the difference I note is not that women should be, or are, Muslim for their husbands, for their families, although that is undeniably part of the context, but that women choose adherence, and this sense of identification goes hand in hand with their expectations, of themselves and their daughters, without the support or presence of men. I hear them talk about domestic violence, the failure of men in work and education, the need for women to be together, rather than isolated, to rely on themselves and each other, rather than men.

But I find it difficult that I have to understand these issues from the point of view of women who have adopted a stronger sense of Muslim identity within their ever-held Bengali identity. In respecting their choices and resisting the resurgence of racism Islamophobia has brought, I have also chosen to identify as Muslim in particular circumstance but, in truth, I prefer the vision of us living in multicolored harmony in the seventies – when the sun always seemed to shine, instead of the dour days of official audits compelling us, interpolating us, as ‘Muslim’ – what do they really mean? Brown? Arab? Immigrant? Or just this era’s ‘other’? As Turner argues: ‘(w)ith the collapse of organised communism in 1989-92, western politics lost its Other. During the last decade, Islam, and in particular fundamentalist Islam, has been constructed as the unambiguous enemy of western civilisation’ (2002: 109).

During this time in the 1970s, my father failed in business, and failed in health, carrying with him the effects of what we charmingly call third world afflictions, such as TB, although I hear that this disease is making a comeback in West. Of all the places we have lived, my mother talks about this house and time fondly. She talks about the house where we lived, the small council house, with her garden where she grew vegetables, hung out the washing and could manage to clean and house us all, whilst my father was sick, idle and on social security and we were all at school, except my eldest sister, who was working and preparing for the (then) inevitable arranged marriage. When she talks of this time and place, it is of the space – how it was manageable, peaceful – and my recollections are similar. Apart from the usual childish fears (the large dog at the end of the street), we roamed around the neighborhood at will, afraid neither of strangers or traffic, those twin anxieties of contemporary urban parenting, although I guess now we think of them as pedophiles and SUVs.

And peace, my mother talks of this as a stable time, and I know that she defines it against the recent past and present, ravaged by deaths and disappointments and the unending worry of the future, the lack of stable marriages, the lack of tradition – of which I have become, in person, both a symbol and a reality. After all, which Bengali, which Muslim, would want a gay son? But as I mentioned earlier, we were not particularly Muslim at

that time, when I was growing up and later, when I came out. I don't recollect regular praying, only abstaining from foods and drink that are forbidden, and communal cultural events gatherings that were amongst Bengalis, not all other Muslims. Now this has changed; modes of dress and religious observance are much stronger, and the identity is much more 'traditionally' Muslim, although not, in my understanding, traditionally South Asian. And the discourse of 9/11, with its stark oppositions of the West and Islam, has produced an double movement – as the Muslim identity becomes more stigmatized, so more people are moving into it, partly through the progress of history and communities, partly through self-identification and reaction to disappointments of the West.

Is the best irony that Muslim identity is giving women a sense of security? A sense of their own potential, and allowing them to articulate demands and expectations, both from Muslim men, and from the wider world so obsessed with their identity? When my mother talks of the time and space of that house, and her garden, she talks of security, but what she means, I think, is the peace of mind that security brings. I have had to accept that after journeying myself through cultures and time, perhaps the peace the women I know need, can be in a space where religion, culture, self respect and self worth grow side by side. Perhaps contemporary Islamophobia renders mainstream cultural spaces uncertain and insecure, and they need to seek out their own gardens, their own Islam. Whilst I may not be able to give meaning to being the faithful one, I remember that Islam has many meanings. Whilst the literal translation may be 'submission' to the will of God, it can also mean – and invokes such meaning in its universal greeting – quite simply, peace.

**Not Quite Muslim, Not Quite Gay: towards a Queer Intersectionality.**

It's a peace I cannot share. I am not quite Muslim, although I have become much more ready to identify as such in those official audits of self that Stanley describes; going through airports, for example, has become a fascinating game of identity interpellation and resistance. My interactionist sense tells me that the official 'they' are often just as uncomfortable with seeing that totalizing identity – I am, after all, a fully fledged label wearing homosexual and therefore Western – but inevitably, resistance on both sides

crumbles or dissolves into the easy, or secure two-step of interpellation and then identification as Muslim.

But I won't ever be the 'Momin' my father named me for because of my gayness, especially when the political opposition of the West and Islam traces the former with women's equality and as Waites points out, more hesitantly with sexual diversity (2008). I may feel more often interpolated as Muslim, and react positively, as a mode of resistance by being Muslim for that interaction, but that consequence of the War on Terror does not negate or dissolve the memories of other terrors; the terror of coming out, causing pain to those I love and terrifyingly, risking the loss of their love, and continuing to live detached from their everyday lives.

But am I gay enough? In truth, being gay has meant being Western in my experience. Perhaps not inevitably being white, but certainly being 'modern' – having to choose and socially construct a life in opposition to tradition, religion and institutionalized heterosexuality. And by default, modern culture has been 'white' modern culture: Western societies during multi-culturalism and gay liberation have not easily accepted either, but gay culture has often mirrored the uncertainties of valuing ethnic difference even as it claimed the validity of sexual difference. Our desires, our icons, our lifestyles represented within commercialized gay culture have been and remain an overwhelmingly hegemonic version of white, youthful masculinity. Whilst existing in that culture has not provoked terrors on the same scale as being racialized or coming out, I have always known that I am 'different' from the 'norm', different from the expected.

But I believe that being gay, along with having an academic career focused on sexuality, has given me experience and intellect to understand and challenge 'norms' and sometimes to resist them. Being a gay academic has allowed me to be a 'queer theory' intellectual, but then, perhaps my becoming gay could only be so with the inflections of my ethnicity, even or particularly when I was resisting those identifications. So my narrative is a queer narrative, illuminating the inability to be ontologically secure, but thus being productively problematic, akin to the way Cosslett et al. characterize feminist

engagement with autobiography as ‘disruptive interdisciplinarity’ (2000:1). Disruptive as a queer identity would be, should be, but entwined within my narrative, or rather constituting it, are those issues of gender norms that render me gay, and render my gayness so problematic. And journeying through those have made me reflect upon the disruptive identities that Muslim women now seem to embody, challenging both secularism and feminism as Motha puts it (2007). The women I discuss would not see themselves as ‘queer’, but in the presentation of agency I have given, they are challenging the negative stereotypes of Islam and women, and disrupting the totalizing oppositions of West/East, freedom/oppression, white western feminism/Muslim female subordination.

That is not *my* story, but my narrative directs us towards these issues, suggesting, I claim, that narratives can illuminate the intersections between realms of the social, how understanding these intersections of identity dimensions are also inevitably about the possibilities and limits of identity within the historical, political contexts of what Islamic identity means in our post-colonial, multi-cultural, post 9/11 world. In this world where totalizing identities are being used to mark Muslims in opposition to the West – and its rights for ‘humans’ – interventions of this ‘queer’ kind, interventions that disrupt such binaries, are ever more urgent. Whilst I rage against the gradual but steady iteration of Muslim abjection, I see in my experience – limited, dislocated, removed from Muslim identity – complexities, differences, resistances to what being a Muslim woman might mean, or what being a Muslim might mean to women and how that ‘queer’ perspective has been developed through my gayness or, more properly, my queerness. And that brings me peace of a sort. Peace in the knowledge that I, and perhaps those in a position similar to my own, can productively illuminate the intersections and complexities of current oppositions and binaries within Muslim communities and families, gay communities and culture, and wider Western political culture and discourses; caught as we are – at every level – between terror, love and belonging.

## Notes

1. I was based in Sociology at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, UK, from 1998-2007, having completed a PhD there on sexuality and democratic politics. In the winter term of 2005, I served as the visiting Libra Professor at the University of Maine in Farmington, Maine, USA. My appointment was in the Women's Studies department, and included delivering the annual Women's History Banquet lecture. As the focus was on women's history, I focused on changes I perceived in Muslim women's identities, from my perspective as a gay man. I found the change of location from my usual life gave me space to think through these issues, and perhaps I have returned to them now precisely because I have had another change of scene, this time moving to Canada in 2007, teaching in Sociology at Trent University.

2. Reviewing intellectual progress in the second edition of her book that laid out an intersectional framework, Hill Collins notes that by 'rejecting additive models of oppression, race, class and gender studies have progressed considerably since the 1980s. During that decade, African- American scholar-activists, among others, called for a new approach to analyzing Black women's experiences ... Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice. (Hill Collins, 2000: 18). Hill Collins also argues for theoretical accounts based on researching and disseminating the experiences of those who inhabit the sites of intersection, enabling their points of view to be illuminated in order to contest established dominant perspectives. This locates her work and intersectional studies in general firmly in the feminist tradition of standpoint epistemology.

3. When Weeks talks of that 'damned morality' in his history of sexuality in Victorian Britain, he refers in large part to the emerging gender divisions that compelled bourgeois women to become the moral and spiritual symbols of their marriage, family, class and national culture (1989). Western women in contemporary times still wrestle with these issues of reputation and the dialectical demands of being sexual and morally pure, evidenced in research done on sexual behavior, often in the context of understanding the possibilities of negotiating safer sexual practices (see Holland et al, 1998, *The Male in the Head*, for example).

4. Queer theory is a diverse approach to cultural studies that emerged in the late 1980s as an extension of lesbian and gay scholarship that ‘newly corroborated the idea that any form of cultural production is inherently ambivalent.’ (Hoogland, 2000: 164). Queer analytical strategies and theories are keenly focused on the exposure and demystification of essentialised *ontologies* of gender and sexual identity. Hood-Williams and Cealey Harrison explain that the deferment of ontology is a major premise of queer: ‘Hence, gender shifts from being a substantive ontological or foundationalist notion to one in which the attributes of gender are performative, socially temporal but re-iterated and, as Goffman might say, ‘giving off’ the appearance of interiority.’ (1998: 76).

5. I was born and raised in Bristol, England from 1968, and then lived in Glasgow, Scotland, where I studied, and then worked as an academic, from 1989-2007. I then fled the British academic system for a job in Sociology at Trent University in Ontario, Canada, about an hour or so north of Toronto. The local town, Peterborough is fairly traditional, mostly white Canadian and with no public gay space but some gay visibility and increasing ethnic diversity.

6. See, for example, recent research by Dale et al. (2002) which focuses on the socio-economic situation for Bengali and Pakistani women in Britain, contextualizing this within the history of Bengali and Pakistani men who have, since immigration first started in significant numbers, remained in low-paid and unskilled jobs and businesses. This is recognized by Government Equality bodies in the UK particularly in relation to the gender gap in pay: see the recent consultation and information gathering campaign, ‘Moving Up?’, details at [www.eoc.org.uk](http://www.eoc.org.uk), showing that both Bangladeshi and Pakistani women (who are overwhelmingly Muslim) and Afro-Caribbean women suffer from greater pay inequalities than ethnic white women.

7. A controversial public debate developed in the UK in autumn 2006 when the Leader of the House of Commons, Jack Straw, revealed that he asked veiled Muslim women to remove their veils when they came to see him as their constituency MP. The intersections of social interaction, ethnicity, religion, gender, terrorism and multiculturalism in this issue echoed previous debates in France (Ezekiel, 2006, Najmabadi, 2006) and sustained a lengthy discussion in British newspapers, television news and political programs, involving politicians, Muslims and, to a lesser extent, the Muslim women who actually

wore the veils (see the article ‘Radical Muslims must integrate, says Blair’ in the *Guardian* newspaper, p4, Saturday, December 9<sup>th</sup> 2006, for example and a range of opinions and some anecdotal evidence that it is young, radical Muslim women who choose the veil on [www.bbc.co.uk/news](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news)). The debate also threw media attention on the case of a Muslim teaching assistant who was sacked for refusing to remove her veil when male teachers were present, and who subsequently lost her employment tribunal claiming discrimination on gender and religious grounds, although the tribunal agreed she had been ‘victimised’. See Vakulenko’s articles on the judicial responses to veiling and headscarves in Europe, in which she illuminates how Muslim women’s agency to choose the veil is being denied by both the legal system and some feminists (2007a, 2007b), echoing Motha’s discussion of how this issue presents a challenge to western feminism and secularism (2007). This issue is also prominent in Canada, with numerous instances of Muslim women being refused the right to wear ‘Islamic’ clothing, from a girl wearing a headscarf during a soccer match in Montreal in 2007, to a ‘code of life’ published by the town of Herouville in which the council encourages immigrants to adapt to Quebec life by ‘not stoning women’ or ‘forcing ‘ them to wear the veil. Ruby’s small study of Canadian Muslim women illustrates the complexity of veiling as an issue that helps women to negotiate identity both within and without their own community in relation to gender, ethnicity and religion (2006).

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